THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

JUNE 35¢

CAPTIVITY

a novelet of The People

by **ZENNA HENDERSON**

LESLIE CHARTERIS

EDWARD S. AARONS

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 14, No. 6 JUNE

Captivity (*a novelet of The People*) *by* ZENNA HENDERSON 5
The Dreistein Case *by* J. LINCOLN PAINE 46
The Communicators *by* EDWARD S. AARONS 50
Devotion *by* KIT REED 69
Services, Incorporated *by* ROG PHILLIPS 77
The Science Stage (*a department*) *by* WILLIAM MORRISON 94
Gathi *by* MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD 96
Origin of the Species *(verse)* *by* KAREN ANDERSON 101
Eripmav *by* DAMON KNIGHT 102
Recommended Reading (*a department*) *by* ANTHONY BOUCHER 103
The Questing Tycoon (*a Saint novelet*) *by* LESLIE CHARTERIS 105
Index to Volume XIV 130

"Coming Next Month" appears on page 4

COVER PAINTING BY MEL HUNTER

(The cover satellite, the third stage of a rocket, is larger and more complicated than present ones. Mel Hunter based his painting on predictions made to him by Heinz Haber and Wernher von Braun.)

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Coming Next Month in F&SF

Our July issue (to be published May 29) will feature two strong new science fiction stories: *Brother Charlie,* a grand swinging odyssey of space adventure by Gordon R. Dickson, and *Theory of Rocketry,* one of C. M. Kornbluth's most mordant analyses of our future (and, by implication, our present). There'll also be a fantasy-satire by Isaac Asimov, unusual in vein even for that versatile maker, and a charming time-travel-love-story by Mildred Clingerman—plus reprints by Michael (FULLY DRESSED AND IN HIS RIGHT MIND) Fessier and ace detective-story writer Roy (THE DEPARTMENT OF DEAD ENDS) Vickers . . . and one of the luckiest historical finds in F&SF's nine-year history: a short story by Jules Verne which has never before appeared in English!

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Hardly a week goes by in this office without the arrival of a letter from a reader who eagerly asks where he can get a collected volume of Zenna Henderson's novelets of The People. Such a volume does not yet exist; but Miss H. reports that she is now at work on a (for the moment) concluding story, which will properly round off for book-form this interstellar chronicle. In the meantime, here is the fifth narrative of these tragic yet triumphant exiles—the longest story in the series to date, and one of the most moving.

Captivity

by ZENNA HENDERSON

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

—PSALM 137

I SUPPOSE MANY LONELY SOULS have sat at their windows many nights looking out into the flood of moonlight, sad with a sadness that knows no comfort, a sadness underlined by a beauty that is in itself a pleasant kind of sorrow—but very few ever have seen what I saw that night.

I leaned against the window frame, close enough to the inflooding light so that it washed across my bare feet and the hem of my gown and splashed whitely against the foot of my bed, but picked up none of my features to identify me as a person, separate from the night. I was enjoying hastily, briefly, the magic of the loveliness before the moon would

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lose itself behind the heavy grove of cottonwoods that lined the creek below the curve of the backyard garden. The first cluster of leaves had patterned itself against the edge of the moon when I saw him—the Francher kid. I felt a momentary surge of disappointment and annoyance that this perfect beauty should be marred by any person at all, let alone the Francher kid, but my annoyance passed as my interest sharpened.

What was he doing—half black and half white in the edge of the moonlight? In the higgledy-piggledy haphazardness of the town, Groman's Grocery sidled in at an angle to the backyard of Somansen's house where I boarded —not farther than twenty feet away. The tiny high-up windows under the eaves of the store blinked in the full light. The Francher kid was standing, back to the moon, staring up at the windows. I leaned closer to watch. There was a waitingness about his shoulders, a prelude to movement, a beginning of something. Then there he was—up at the windows, pushing softly against the panes, opening a dark rectangle against the white side of the store. And then he was gone. I blinked and looked again. Store. Windows. One opened blankly. No Francher kid. Little windows. High up under the eaves. One opened blankly. No Francher kid.

Then the blank opening had movement inside it and the Francher kid emerged with both hands full of something and slid down the moonlight to the ground outside.

Now looky here! I said to myself. *Hey! Lookit now!*

The Francher kid sat down on one end of a 12-by-12 timber that lay half in our garden and half behind the store. Carefully and neatly he aranged his booty along the plank. Three cokes, a box of candy bars, and a huge harmonica that had been in the store for years. He sat and studied the items, touching each one with a finger tip. Then he picked up a coke and studied the cap on it. He opened the box of candy and closed it again. He ran a finger down the harmonica and then lifted it between the pointer fingers of his two hands. Holding it away from him in the moonlight, he looked at it, his head swinging slowly down its length. And, as his head swung, faintly, faintly, I heard a musical scale run up, then down. Careful note by careful note singing softly but clearly in the quiet night.

The moon was burning holes through the cottonwood tops by now and the yard was slipping into shadow. I heard notes riff rapidly up and cascade back down, gleefully, happily, and I saw the glint and chromium glitter of the harmonica, dancing

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from shadow to light and back again, singing untouched in the air. Then the moon reached an opening in the trees and spotlighted the Francher kid almost violently. He was sitting on the plank, looking up at the harmonica, a small smile on his usually sullen face. And the harmonica sang its quiet song to him as he watched it. His face shadowed suddenly as he looked down at the things laid out on the plank. He gathered them up abruptly and walked up the moonlight to the little window and slid through, head first. Behind him, alone, unattended, the harmonica danced and played, hovering and darting like a dragon fly. Then the kid reappeared, sliding head first out the window. He sat himself crosslegged in the air beside the harmonica and watched and listened. The gay dance slowed and changed. The harmonica cried softly in the moonlight, an aching, asking cry as it spiraled up and around until it slid through the open window and lost its voice in the darkness. The window clicked shut and the Francher kid thudded to the ground. He slouched off through the shadows, his elbows winging sharply backward as he jammed his fists in his pockets.

I let go of the curtain where my clenched fingers had cut four nail-sized holes through the age-fragile lace, and released a breath I couldn't remember holding. I stared at the empty plank and wet my lips. I took a deep breath of the mountain air that was supposed to do me so much good and turned away from the window. For the thousandth time I muttered *I won't* and groped for the bed. For the thousandth time I finally reached for my crutches and swung myself over to the edge of the bed. I dragged the unresponsive half of me up onto the bed, arranging myself for sleep. I leaned against the pillow and put my hands in back of my head, my elbows fanning out on either side. I stared at the light square that was the window until it wavered and rippled before my sleepy eyes. Still my mind was only nibbling at what had happened and showed no inclination to set its teeth into any sort of explanation. I awakened with a start to find the moonlight gone, my arms asleep and my prayers unsaid.

Tucked in bed and ringed about with the familiar comfort of my prayers, I slid away from awareness into sleep, following the dance and gleam of a harmonica that cried in the moonlight.

Morning sunlight slid across the boarding house breakfast table, casting alpine shadows behind the spilled cornflakes that lay beyond the sugar bowl. I squinted against the brightness and felt aggrieved that anything should be alive and

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active and so—so—hopeful so early in the morning. I leaned on my elbows over my coffee cup and contemplated a mood as black as the coffee.

". . . Francher kid."

I rotated my head upwards on the axis of my two supporting hands, my interest caught. *Last night,* I half remembered, *last night—*

"I give up." Anna Semper put a third spoonful of sugar in her coffee and stirred morosely. "Every child has a something—I mean there's *some* way to reach every child . . . all but the Francher kid. I can't reach him at all. If he'd even be aggressive or actively mean or actively *anything* maybe I could do something, but he just sits there being a vegetable. And then I get so spittin' mad when he finally *does* do something, just enough to keep him from flunking, that I could bust a gusset. I can't abide a child who can and won't." She frowned darkly and added two more spoonfuls of sugar to her coffee. "I'd rather have an eager moron than a won't-do genius!" She tasted the coffee and grimaced. "Can't even get a decent cup of coffee to arm me for my struggle with the little monster."

I laughed. "Five spoonfuls of sugar would spoil almost anything. And don't give up hope. Have you tried music? Remember, music hath charms—"

Anna reddened to the tip of her ears. I couldn't tell if it was anger or embarrassment. "Music!" Her spoon clished against her saucer sharply. She groped for words. "This is ridiculous, but I have had to send that Francher kid out of the room during music appreciation."

"Out of the room? Whyever for? I thought he was a vegetable."

Anna reddened still further. "He is," she said stubbornly, "but—" She fumbled with her spoon then burst forth, "But sometimes the record player won't work when he's in the room."

I put my cup down slowly. "Oh, come now!" I said. "This coffee is awfully strong, I'll admit, but it's not *that* strong."

"No, really!" Anna twisted her spoon between her two hands. "When he's in the room that darned player goes too fast or too slow or even backwards. I swear it. And one time . . ." Anna looked around furtively and lowered her voice. "One time it played a whole record and it wasn't even plugged in!"

"You ought to patent that!" I said. "That'd be a real money-maker."

"Go on, laugh!" Anna gulped coffee again and grimaced. "I'm beginning to believe in poltergeists—you know, the kind that are supposed to work through or because of adolescent kids. If you

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had that kid to deal with in class—"

"Yes." I fingered my cold toast. "If only I did."

And for a minute I hated Anna fiercely for the sympathy on her open face and for the studied-unlooking at my leaning crutches. She opened her mouth, closed it, then leaned across the table.

"Polio?" she blurted, reddening.

"No," I said. "Car wreck."

"Oh." She hesitated. "Well, maybe some day—"

"No," I said. "No." Denying the faint possibility that was just enough to keep me nagged out of resignation.

"Oh," she said. "How long ago?"

"How long?" For a minute I was suspended in wonder at the distortion of time. How long? Recent enough to be a shock each time of immobility when I expected motion. Long enough ago that eternity was between me and the last time I moved unthinkingly.

"Almost a year," I said, my memory aching to *this time last year I could—*

"You were a teacher?" Anna gave her watch a quick appraising look.

"Yes," I said. I didn't automatically verify the time. The immediacy of watches had died for me. Then I smiled. "That's why I can sympathize with you about the Francher kid. I've had them before."

"There's always one," sighed Anna, getting up. "Well, it's time for my pilgrimage up the hill. I'll see you." And the swinging door to the hall repeated her departure again and again with diminishing enthusiasm. I struggled to my feet and swung myself to the window.

"Hey!" I shouted. She turned at the gate, peering back as she rested her load of work books on the gate post.

"Yes?"

"If he gives you too much trouble, send him over here with a note for me. It'll take him off your hands for a while at least."

"Hey, that's an idea. Thanks. That's swell! Straighten your halo!" And she waved an elbow at me as she disappeared beyond the box elder outside the gate.

I didn't think she would, but she did.

It was only a couple of days later that I looked up from my book at the creak of the old gate. The heavy old gear that served as a weight to pull it shut thudded dully behind the Francher kid. He walked up the porch steps under my close scrutiny with none of the hesitant embarrassment that most people would feel. He mounted the three steps and wordlessly handed me an envelope. I opened it. It said:

Dust off your halo! I've reached the !! stage. Wouldn't you like to keep him permanent-like?

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"Won't you sit down?" I gestured to the porch swing, wondering how I was going to handle this deal.

He looked at the swing and sank down on the top porch step.

"What's your name?"

He looked at me incuriously. "Francher." His voice was husky and unused-sounding.

"Is that your first name?"

"That's my name."

"What's your other name?" I asked patiently, falling into a first-grade dialog in spite of his age.

"They put down Clement," he said.

"Clement Francher," I said. "A good-sounding name, but what do people call you?"

His eyebrows slanted subtly upwards and a tiny bitter smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

"With their eyes—juvenile delinquent, lazy trash, no-good offscouring, potential criminal, burden—"

I winced away from the icy malice of his voice.

"But mostly they call me a whole sentence, like—'well, what can you expect from a background like that?' "

His knuckles were white against his faded levis. Then as I watched them, the color crept back and, without visible relaxation, the tension was gone. But his eyes were the eyes of a boy too big to cry and too young for any other comfort.

"What *is* your background?" I asked quietly, as though I had the right to ask. He answered as simply as though he owed me an answer.

"We were with the carnival. We went to all the fairs around the country. Mother—" His words nearly died. "Mother had a mind-reading act. She was good. She was better than anyone knew—better than she wanted to be. It hurt and scared her sometimes to walk through people's minds. Sometimes she would come back to the trailer and cry and cry and take a long, long shower and wash herself until her hands were all water-soaked and her hair hung in dripping strings. They curled at the end. She couldn't get all the fear and hate and—and tired dirt off even that way. Only if she could find a Good to read, or a dark church with tall candles."

"And where is she now?" I asked, holding a small warm picture in my mind of narrow, fragile shoulders, thin and defenseless under a flimsy moist robe, with one wet strand of hair dampening one shoulder of it.

"Gone." His eyes were over my head but empty of the vision of the weather-worn siding of the house. "She died. Three years ago. This is a foster home. To try to make a decent citizen of me."

There was no inflection in his words. They lay as flat as paper between us in our silence.

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"You like music," I said, curling Anna's note around my forefinger, remembering what I had seen the other night.

"Yes." His eyes were on the note. "Miss Semper doesn't think so, though. I hate that scratchy wrapped-up music."

"You sing?"

"No. I make music."

"You mean you play an instrument?"

He frowned a little impatiently. "No. I make music with instruments."

"Oh," I said. "There's a difference?"

"Yes." He turned his head away. I had disappointed him or failed him in some way.

"Wait," I said. "I want to show you something." I struggled to my feet. Oh, deftly and quickly enough under the circumstances, I suppose, but it seemed an endless, aching effort in front of the Francher kid's eyes. But finally I was up and swinging in through the front door. When I got back with my key chain, the kid was still staring at my empty chair and I had to struggle myself back into it under his unwavering eyes.

"Can't you stand alone?" he asked, as though he had a right to.

"Very little, very briefly," I answered, as though I owed him an answer.

"You don't walk without those braces," he said.

"I can't walk without those braces," I said. "Here." I held out my key chain. There was a charm on it: a harmonica with four notes, so small that I had never managed to blow one by itself. The four together made a tiny breathy chord, like a small hesitant wind.

He took the chain between his fingers and swung the charm back and forth, his head bent so that the sunlight flickered across its tousledness. The chain stilled. For a long moment there wasn't a sound. Then clearly, sharply, came the musical notes, one after another. There was a slight pause and then four notes poured their separateness together to make a clear, sweet chord.

"You make music," I said, barely audibly.

"Yes." He gave me back my key chain and stood up. "I guess she's cooled down now. I'll go on back."

"To work?"

"To work." He smiled wryly. "For a while, anyway." He started down the walk.

"What if I tell?" I called after him.

"I told once," he called back over his shoulder. "Try it if you want to."

I sat for a long time on the porch after he left. My fingers were closed over the harmonica as I watched the sun creep up my skirts and into my lap. Finally

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I turned Anna's envelope over. The seal was still secure. The end was jagged where I had torn it. The paper was opaque. I blew a tiny breathy chord on the harmonica. Then I shivered as cold crept across my shoulders. The chill was chased away by a tiny hot wave of excitement. So his mother could walk through the minds of others. So he knew what was in a sealed letter—or had he got his knowledge from Anna before the letter? So he could make music with harmonicas. So the Francher kid was— My hurried thoughts caught and came to a full stop. What *was* the Francher kid?

II

After school that day, Anna toiled up the four front steps and rested against the railing, half sitting and half leaning. "I'm too tired to sit down," she said. "I'm wound up like a clock and I'm going to strike something pretty darned quick." She half laughed and grimaced a little. "Probably my laundry. I'm fresh out of clothes." She caught a long ragged breath. "You must have built a fire under that Francher kid," she said. "He came back and piled into his math book and did the whole week's assignments that he hadn't bothered with before. Did them in less than an hour, too. Makes me mad, though—" She grimaced again and pressed her hand to her chest. "Darn that chalk dust, anyway. Thanks a million for your assist. I wish I were optimistic enough to believe it would last." She leaned and breathed, her eyes closing with the effort. "Awful shortage of air around here." Her hands fretted with her collar. "Anyway the Francher kid said you'd substitute for me until my pneumonia is over." She laughed, a little soundless laugh. "He doesn't know that it's just chalk dust and that I'm never sick." She buried her face in her two hands and burst into tears. "I'm not sick, am I? It's only that darn Francher kid!"

She was still blaming him when Mrs. Somansen came out and led her in to her bedroom and when the doctor arrived to shake his head over her chest.

So that's how it was that the first-floor First Grade was hastily moved upstairs and the Junior High was hastily moved downstairs and I once more found myself facing the challenge of a class, telling myself that the Francher kid needed no special knowledge to say that I'd substitute. After all, I liked Anna, I was the only substitute available, and besides, any slight—substitute's pay! —addition to the exchequer was most welcome. You *can* live on those monthly checks, but it's pleasant to have a couple of extra coins to clink together.

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By mid-morning I knew a little of what Anna was sweating over. His absolutely dead-weight presence in the room was a drag on everything we did. Recitations paused, limped and halted when they came to him. Activities swirled around his inactivity, creating distracting eddies. It wasn't only a negative sort of non-participation on his part but an aggressively positive not-doingness. It wasn't just a hindrance, but an active opposition — without any overt action for any sort of proof of his attitude. This, coupled with my disappointment in not having the same comfortable rapport with him that I'd had before, and the bone-weariness of having to be vertical all day instead of collapsing horizontally at intervals, and the strain of getting back into harness, cold, with a roomful of teeners and subteeners, had me worn down to a nubbin by early afternoon.

So I fell back on the perennial refuge of harried teachers and opened a discussion of "What I want to be when I grow up." We had gone through the usual nurses and airplane hostesses and pilots and bridge builders and the usual unexpected ballet dancer and CPA (and he still can't add 6 and 9!) until the discussion frothed like a breaking wave against the Francher kid and stilled there.

He was lounging down in his seat, his weight supported by the back of his neck and the remote end of his spine. The class sighed collectively though inaudibly and waited for his contribution.

"And you, Clement?" I prompted, shifting vainly, trying to ease the taut cry of aching muscles.

"An outlaw," he said huskily, not bothering to straighten up. "I'm going to keep a list and break every law there is—and get away with it, too."

"Whatever for?" I asked, trying to reassure the sick pang inside me. "An outlaw is no use at all to society."

"Who wants to be of use?" he asked. "I'll use society—and I can do it."

"Perhaps," I said, knowing full well it was so. "But that's not the way to happiness."

"Who's happy?" he asked. "The bad are unhappy because they are bad. The good are unhappy because they're afraid to be bad—"

"Clement," I said gently. "I think you are—"

"I think he's crazy," said Rigo, his black eyes flashing. "Don't pay him no never mind, Miss Carolle. He's a screwball. He's all the time saying crazy things."

I saw the heavy world globe on the top shelf of the book case behind Rigo shift and slide towards the edge. I saw it lift clear of the shelf and I cried out, "Clement!" The whole class started at the loud urgency of my

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voice, the Francher kid included, and Rigo moved just far enough out of line that the falling globe missed him and cracked itself apart at his feet.

Someone screamed and several gasped and a babble of voices broke out. I caught the Francher kid's eyes and he flushed hotly and ducked his head. Then he straightened up proudly and defiantly returned my look. He wet his forefinger in his mouth and drew an invisible tally mark in the air before him. I shook my head at him, slowly, regretfully. What could I do with a child like this?

Well, I had to do something; so I told him to stay in after school, though the kids wondered why. He slouched against the door, defiance in every awkward angle of his body and in the hooking of his thumbs into his front pockets. I let the parting noises fade and die, the last hurried clang of lunch pail, the last flurry of feet, the last reverberant slam of the outside door. The Francher kid shifted several times, easing the tension of his shoulders as he waited. Finally, I said, "Sit down."

"No." His word was flat and uncompromising. I looked at him, the gaunt young planes of his face, the unhappy mouth, thinned to stubbornness, the eyes that blinded themselves with dogged defiance. I leaned across the desk, my hands clasped, and wondered what I could say. Argument would do no good. A kid of that age has an answer for everything.

"We all have violences," I said, tightening my hands, "but we can't always let them out. Think what a mess things would be if we did." I smiled wryly into his unresponsive face. "If we gave in to every violent impulse, I'd probably have slapped you with an encyclopedia before now." His eyelids flicked, startled, and he looked straight at me for the first time.

"Sometimes we can just hold our breath until the violence swirls away from us. Other times it's too big and it swells inside us like a balloon until it chokes our lungs and aches our jaw hinges." His lids flickered down over his watching eyes. "But it can be put to use. Then's when we stir up a cake by hand or chop wood or kick cans across the back yard or" —I faltered—"or run until our knees bend both ways from tiredness."

There was a small silence while I held my breath until my violent rebellion against unresponsive knees swirled away from me.

"There are bigger violences, I guess," I went on. "From them come assault and murder, vandalism and war, but even those can be used. If you want to smash things, there are worthless things that need to be smashed, and things that ought to be destroyed, ripped apart and ruined. But you

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have no way of knowing what those things are, yet. You must keep your violences small until you learn how to tell the difference."

"I can smash." His voice was thick.

"Yes," I said. "But smash to build. You have no right to hurt other people with your own hurt."

"People!" The word was profanity.

I drew a long breath. If he were younger . . . You can melt stiff rebellious arms and legs with warm hugs or a hand across a wind-ruffled head or a long look that flickers into a smile, but what can you do with a creature that's neither adult nor child, but puzzlingly both? I leaned forward.

"Francher," I said softly. "If your mother could walk through your mind now—"

He reddened, then paled. His mouth opened. He swallowed tightly. Then he jerked himself upright in the doorway.

"Leave my mother alone." His voice was shaken and muffled. "You leave her alone. She's dead."

I listened to his footsteps and the crashing slam of the outside door. For some sudden reason I felt my heart follow him down the hill to town. I sighed, almost with exasperation. So this was to be a My Child. We teacher-types sometimes find them. They aren't our pets—often they aren't even in our classes. But they are the children who move unasked into our hearts and make claims upon them over-and-above-the-call-of-duty. And this My Child I had to reach. Somehow I had to keep him from sliding on over the borderline to lawlessness as he so surely was doing—this My Child who, even more than the usual My Child, was different.

I put my head down on the desk and let weariness ripple up over me. After a minute I began to straighten up my papers. I made the desk-top tidy and took my purse out of the bottom drawer. I struggled to my feet and glared at my crutches. Then I grinned weakly.

"Come, friends," I said. "Leave us help one another depart."

Anna was out for a week. After she returned, I was surprised at my reluctance to let go of the class. The sniff of chalk dust was in my nostrils and I ached to be busy again. So I started helping out with the school programs and teen-age dances, which led naturally to the day my committee and I stood in the town recreation hall and looked about us despairingly.

"How long have those decorations been up?" I craned my neck to get a better view of the wilderness of sooty cobwebby crepe paper that clotted the whole of the high ceiling and the upper reaches of the walls of the ram-

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shackled old hall that leaned wearily against the back of the saloon. Twyla stopped chewing the end of one of her heavy braids of hair. "About four years, I guess. At least the newest. Pea-Green put it all up."

"Pea-Green?"

"Yeah. He was a screwball. He used up every piece of crepe paper in town and used nails to put the stuff up—big nails. He's gone now. He got silicosis and went down to Hot Springs."

"Well, nails or no nails, we can't have a Halloween dance with that stuff up."

"Going to miss the old junk. How we going to get it down?" asked Janniset.

"Pea-Green used an extension ladder he borrowed from a power crew that was stringing some wires up to the Bluebell mine," said Rigo. "But we'll have to find some other way to get it down, now."

I felt a flick of something at my elbow. It might have been the Francher kid shifting from one foot to the other, or it might have been just a thought slipping by. I glanced sideways, but caught only the lean line of his cheek and the shaggy back of his neck.

"I think I can get a ladder." Rigo snapped his thumbnail loudly with his white front teeth. "It won't reach clear up, but it'll help."

"We could take rakes and just drag it down," suggested Twyla.

We all laughed until I sobered us all with, "It might come to that yet, bless the buttons of whoever thought up twenty-foot ceilings. Well, tomorrow's Saturday. Everybody be here about nine and we'll get with it."

"Can't." The Francher kid cast anchor unequivocally, snagging all our willingness up short.

"Oh?" I shifted my crutches and, as usual, his eyes fastened on them, almost hypnotically. "That's too bad."

"How come?" Rigo was belligerent. "If the rest of us can, you oughta be able to. Ever'body's s'posed to do this together. Ever'body does the dirty work and ever'body has the fun. You're nobody special. You're on this committee, aren't you?"

I restrained myself from a sudden impulse to clap my hand over Rigo's mouth midway in his protest. I didn't like the quietness of the Francher kid's hands, but he only looked slantwise up at Rigo and said, "I got volunteered on this committee. I didn't ask to. And to fix this joint up today. I gotta work tomorrow."

"Work? Where?" Rigo frankly disbelieved.

"Sorting ore at the Absolom."

Rigo snapped his thumbnail again derisively. "That penny-picking stuff? They pay peanuts."

"Yes." And the Francher kid slouched off around the corner of

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the building without a glance or a goodby.

"Well, he's working!" Twyla thoughtfully spit out a stray hair and pointed the wet end of her braid with her fingers. "The Francher kid's doing something. I wonder how come?"

"Trying to figure that dopy dill-dock out?" asked Janniset. "Don't waste your time. I bet he's just goofing off."

"You kids run on," I said. "We can't do anything tonight. I'll lock up. See you in the morning."

I waited inside the dusty, echoing hall until the sound of their going died down the rocky alley that edged around the rim of the railroad cut and dissolved into the street of the town. I still couldn't reconcile myself to slowing their steps to match my uncertain feet. Maybe someday I would be able to accept my braces as others accept glasses; but not yet—oh, not yet!

I left the hall and snapped the dime-store padlock shut. I struggled precariously along through the sliding shale and loose rocks until suddenly one piece of shale shattered under the pressure of one on my crutches and I stumbled off balance. I saw with shake-making clarity in the accelerated speed of the moment that the only place my groping crutch could reach was the smooth curving of a small boulder, and, in that same instant, I visualized myself sprawling helplessly, hopelessly in the clutter of the alley, a useless, non-functioning piece of humanity, a drag and a hindrance on everyone again. And then, at the last possible instant, the smooth boulder slid aside and my crutch caught and steadied on the solid damp hollow beneath it. I caught my breath with relief and unclenched my spasmed hands a little—Lucky!

Then all at once there was the Francher kid at my elbow again, quietly waiting.

"Oh!" I hoped he hadn't seen me floundering in my awkwardness. "Hi! I thought you'd gone."

"I really will be working." His voice had lost its flatness. "I'm not making much, but I'm saving to buy me a musical instrument."

"Well, good!" I said, smiling into the unusualness of his straightforward look. "What kind of instrument?"

"I don't know," he said. "Something that will sing like this—"

And there on the rocky trail with the long light slanting through the trees for late afternoon, I heard soft, tentative notes that stumbled at first and then began to sing: *Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling . . .* Each note of this, my favorite, was like a white flower opening inside me in ascending order like steps—steps that I could climb freely, lightly—

"What kind of instrument am I

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saving for?" The Francher kid's voice pulled me back down to earth.

"You'll have to settle for less." My voice shook a little. "There isn't one like that."

"But I've heard it—" He was bewildered.

"Maybe you have," I said. "But was anyone playing it?"

"Why yes—no," he said. "I used to hear it from Mom. She thought it to me."

"Where did your mom come from?" I asked impulsively.

"From Terror and from Panic Places. From Hunger and from Hiding—to live midway between madness and The Dream—" He looked at me, his mouth drooping a little. "She promised me I'd understand some day, but this is someday and she's gone."

"Yes," I sighed, remembering how once I had dreamed that someday I'd run again. "But there are other somedays ahead—for you."

"Yes," he said. "And time hasn't stopped for you, either." And he was gone.

I looked after him. "Doggone!" I thought. "There I go again, talking to him as though he made sense!" I poked the end of my crutch in the damp earth three times, making interlacing circles. Then with quickened interest, I poked the boulder that had rolled *up* out of the slight hollow before the crutch tip had landed there.

"Son-a-gun!" I cried aloud. "Well, son-a-gun!"

Next morning at five of nine the kids were waiting for me at the door to the hall, huddled against the October chill that the milky sun hadn't had time to disperse yet. Rigo had a shaky old ladder with two broken rungs and splashes of old paint gumming it liberally.

"That looks awfully rickety," I said. "We don't want any blood spilled on our dance floor. It's bad for the wax."

Rigo grinned. "It'll hold me up," he said. "I used it last night to pick apples. You just have to be kinda careful."

"Well, be so then," I smiled, unlocking the door. "Better safe than—" My words faltered and died as I gaped in at the open door. The others pushed in around me, round-eyed and momentarily silenced. My first wild impression was that the ceiling had fallen in.

"My gorsh!" gasped Janniset. "What hit this place?"

"Just look at it!" shrilled Twyla. "Hey! Just look at it!"

We looked as we scuffled forward. Every single piece of paper was gone from the ceiling and walls. Every scrap of paper was on the floor, in tiny twisted confetti-sized pieces like a tattered, faded snowfall, all over the floor. There must have been an incred-

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ible amount of paper tangled in the decorations, because we waded wonderingly almost ankle-deep through it.

"Looky here!" Rigo was staring at the front of the bandstand. Lined up neatly across the front stood all the nails that had been pulled out of the decorations, each balanced precisely on its head.

Twyla frowned and bit her lip. "It scares me," she said. "It doesn't feel right. It looks like somebody was mad or crazy—like they tore up the paper wishing they was killing something. And then to put all those nails so—so even and careful, like they had been put down gently—that looks madder than the paper." She reached over and swept her finger sideways, wincing as though she expected a shock. A section of the nails toppled with faint pings on the bare boards of the stand. In a sudden flurry, Twyla swept all the nails over. "There!" she said, wiping her finger on her dress. "Now it's all crazy."

"Well," I said, "crazy or not, somebody's saved us a lot of trouble. Rigo, we won't need your ladder. Get the brooms and let's get this mess swept out."

While they were gone for the brooms, I picked up two nails and clicked them together in a metrical cadence: *Oh Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling . . .*

By noon we had the place scrubbed out and fairly glistening through its shabby paint. By evening we had the crisp new orange-and-black decorations up, low down and with thumb tacks, and all sighed with tired satisfaction at how good the place looked. As we locked up Twyla suddenly said in a small voice, "What if it happens again before the dance Friday? All our work—"

"It won't," I promised. "It won't."

In spite of my hanging back and trying the lock a couple of times, Twyla was still waiting when I turned away from the door. She was examining the end of her braid carefully as she said, "It was him, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I said.

"How did he do it?" she asked.

"You've known him longer than I have," I said. "How did he do it?"

"Nobody knows the Francher kid," she said. Then softly, "He looked at me once, really looked at me. He's funny—but not to laugh," she hastened. "When he looked at me it—" Her hand tightened on her braid until her head tilted and she glanced up slantingly at me. "It made music in me.

"You know," she said quickly into the echo of her unorthodox words, "you're kinda like him. He makes me think things and believe things I wouldn't ever by myself. You make me say things

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I wouldn't ever by myself—no, that's not quite right. You *let* me say things I wouldn't dare to say to anyone else."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, Twyla."

III

I had forgotten the trembling glamor of a teen-age dance. I had forgotten the cautious stilted gait of high heels on loafer-type feet. I had forgotten how the look of maturity could be put on with a tie and sports jacket and how—how *people-like* teen-agers could look when divorced for a while from levis and flannel shirts. Janniset could hardly contain himself for his own splendor and turned not a hair of his incredibly polished head when I smiled my "Good evening, Mr. Janniset." But in his pleased satisfaction at my formality, he forgot himself as he turned away and hoisted up his sharply creased trousers as though they were his old levis.

Rigo was stunning in his latin handsomeness and he and Angie so drowned in one another's dark eyes that I could see why our Mexican youngsters usually marry so young. And Angie! Well, she didn't look like any eighth grader—her strapless gown, her dangly earrings, her laughing flirtatious eyes—but taken out of the context and custom and tradition, she was breathtakingly lovely. Of course it was on her "unsuitable for her age" dress and jewelry and makeup that the long line of mothers and aunts and grandmothers fixed disapproving eyes, but I'd be willing to bet that there were plenty who wished their own child could look as lovely.

In this small community, the girls always dressed up to the hilt at the least provocation, and the Halloween dance was usually the first event of the Fall that could serve as an excuse. Crinolined skirts belled like blossoms across the floor above the glitter of high heels, but it was only a matter of a few minutes before the shoes were kicked off, to toe in together forlornly under a chair or dangle from some motherly forefinger while unprotected toes braved the brogans of the boys.

Twyla was bright-cheeked and laughing, dance after dance, until the first intermission. She and Janniset brought me punch where I sat among the other spectators, then Janniset skidded off across the floor, balancing his paper cup precariously as he went to take another look at Marty who, at school, was only a girl, but here, all dressed up, was the dawn of woman-wonder for him. Twyla gulped her punch hastily and then licked the corners of her mouth.

"He isn't here," she said huskily.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wanted

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him to have fun with the rest of you. Maybe he'll come yet."

"Maybe." She twisted her cup slowly, then hastily shoved it under the chair as it threatened to drip on her dress.

"That's a beautiful dress," I said. "I love the way your petticoat shows red against the blue when you whirl."

"Thank you." She smoothed the billowing of her skirt. "I feel funny with sleeves. None of the others have them. That's why he didn't come, I bet. Not having any dress-up clothes like the others, I mean. Nothing but levis."

"Oh, that's a shame," I said. "If I had known—"

"No," she said. "Mrs. McVey is supposed to buy his clothes. She gets money for them. All she does is sit around and talk about how much she sacrifices to take care of the Francher kid and she doesn't take care of him at all. It's her fault—"

"Let's not be too critical of others," I said. "There may be circumstances we know nothing of—and besides"— I nodded my head—"he's here now."

Almost I could see the leap of her heart under the close-fitting blue as she turned to look.

The Francher kid was lounging against the door, his face closed and impassive. I noted with a flame of anger at Mrs. McVey that he was dressed in his levis, faded almost white from many washings, and a flannel shirt, the plaid of which was nearly indistinguishable except along the seams. It wasn't fair to keep him from being like the other kids even in this minor way—or maybe especially in this way because clothes can't be hidden the way a mind or soul can.

I tried to catch his eye and beckon him in, but he looked only at the bandstand where the band members were preparing to resume playing. It was almost tragic that the Francher kid had only this handful of inexpertly played instruments to feed his hunger on. He winced back into the darkness at their first blare and I felt Twyla's tenseness as she turned to me.

"He won't come in," she half shouted against the take-a-melody-tear-it-to-pieces-stick-it-back-together-bleeding type of music that was going on.

I shook my head regretfully. "I guess not," I mouthed and then was drawn into a half-audible, completely incomprehensible conversation with Mrs. Frisney. It wasn't until the next dance started and she was towed away by Grampa Griggs that I could turn back to Twyla. She was gone. I glanced around the room. Nowhere the swirl of blue echoing the heavy brown-gold swing of her pony tail.

There was no reason for me to feel apprehensive. There were

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any number of places she might have gone and quite legitimately, but I suddenly felt an overwhelming need for fresh air, and swung myself past the romping dancers and out into the gasping chill of the night. I huddled closer inside my jacket, wishing it were on right instead of merely flung around my shoulders. But the air tasted clean and fresh. I don't know what we'd been breathing in the dance hall, but it wasn't air. By the time I'd got the whatever-it-was out of my lungs and filled them with the freshness of the night, I found myself halfway down the path over the edge of the railroad cut. There hadn't been a train over the single track since nineteen ought something and just across it was a thicket of willows and cottonwoods and a few scraggly piñon trees. As I moved into the shadow of the trees, I glanced up at the sky ablaze with a skrillion stars that dissolved into light near the lopsided moon and perforated the darker horizon with brilliance. I was startled out of my absorption by the sound of movement and music. I took an uncertain step into the dark. A few yards away, I saw the flick of skirts and started to call out to Twyla. But instead I rounded the brush in front of me and saw what she was intent upon.

The Francher kid was dancing —dancing all alone in the quiet night. No, not alone, because a column of yellow leaves had swirled up from the ground around him and danced with him to a melody so exactly their movement that I couldn't be sure there was music. Fascinated, I watched the drift and sway, the swirl and turn, the treetop-high rise and the hesitant drifting fall of the Francher kid and the autumn leaves. But somehow I couldn't see the kid as a separate levi'd, flannel-shirted entity. He and the leaves blended so together that the sudden sharp definition of a hand or of a turning head was startling. The kid was just a larger leaf borne along with the smaller in the chilly winds of fall. On a final minor glissade of the music, the Francher kid slid to the ground.

He stood for a moment, head bent, crumbling a crisp leaf in his fingers, then he turned swiftly defensive to the rustle of movement. Twyla stepped out into the clearing. For a moment they stood looking at each other without a word. Then Twyla's voice came so softly I could barely hear it.

"I would have danced with you."

"With me like this?" He gestured at his clothes.

"Sure," she said. "It doesn't matter."

"In front of everyone?"

"If you wanted to," she said. "I wouldn't mind."

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"Not there," he said. "It's too tight and hard."

"Then here," she said, holding out her hands.

"The music—" but his hands were reaching for hers.

"Your music," she said.

"My mother's music," he corrected.

And the music began, a haunting, lilting waltztime melody. As lightly as the leaves that stirred at their feet, the two circled the clearing.

I have the picture yet, but when I return to it, my heart is emptied of adjectives because there are none for such enchantment. The music quickened and swelled, softly, richly full—the lost music that a mother bequeathed to her child.

Twyla was so completely engrossed in the magic of the moment that I'm sure she didn't even know when their feet no longer rustled in the fallen leaves. She couldn't have known when the treetops brushed their shoes—when the long turning of the tune brought them back, spiraling down into the clearing. Her scarlet petticoat caught on a branch as they passed and left a bright shred to trail the wind, but even that did not distract her.

Before my heart completely broke with wonder, the music faded softly away and left the two standing on the ragged grass. After a breathless pause, Twyla's hand went softly, wonderingly to Francher's cheek. The kid turned his face slowly and pressed his mouth to her palm. Then they turned and left each other, without a word.

Twyla passed so close to me that her skirts brushed mine. I let her cross the tracks back to the dance before I followed. I got there just in time to catch the whisper on apparently the second round: ". . . alone out there with the Francher kid!" and the gleefully malicious shock of ". . . and her petticoat is torn—"

It was like pigsty muck clotting an Easter dress.

IV

Anna said, "Hi!" and flung herself into my one armchair. As the front leg collapsed, she caught herself with the dexterity of long practice, tilted the chair, re-inserted the leg and then eased herself back into its dusty depths.

"From the vagaries of the small town, good Lord deliver me!" she moaned.

"What now?" I asked, shifting gears on my crochet hook as I finished another row of my rug.

"You mean you haven't heard the latest scandal?" Her eyes widened in mock horror and her voice sank conspiratorially. "They were out there in the dark—alone—doing Nobody Knows What. Imagine!" Her voice shook with avid

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outrage. "With the Francher kid!

"Honestly!" Her voice returned to normal. "You'd think the Francher kid was leprosy or something. What a to-do about a little nocturnal smooching. I'd give you odds that most of the other kids are being shocked to ease their own consciences of the same kind of carryings-on. But just because it is the Francher kid—"

"They weren't alone," I said casually, holding a tight rein on my indignation. "I was there."

"You were?" Anna's eyebrows bumped her crisp bangs. "Well, well. This complexions things different. What did happen? Not," she hastened, "that I credit these wild tales about, my golly, Twyla, but what did happen?"

"They danced," I said. "The Francher kid was ashamed of his clothes and wouldn't come in the hall. So they danced down in the clearing."

"Without music?"

"The Francher kid...hummed," I said, my eyes intent on my work.

There was a brief silence. "Well," said Anna. "That's interesting, especially that vacant spot I feel in there. But you *were* there?"

"Yes," I said.

"And they just danced?"

"Yes." I apologized mentally for making so pedestrian the magic I had seen. "And Twyla caught her petticoat on a branch and it tore before she knew it."

"Hmmm." Anna was suddenly sober. "You ought to take your rug up to the Sew-Sew Club."

"But I—" I was bewildered.

"They're serving nice heaping portions of Twyla's reputation for refreshments and Mrs. McVey is contributing the dessert—the unplumbed depravity of foster children."

I stuffed my rug back into its bag. "Is my face on?" I asked.

Well, I got back to the Somanson's that evening considerably wider of eye than I had left it. Anna took my things from me at the door.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"My gorsh!" I said, easing myself into a chair. "If they ever got started on me, what would I have left?"

"Bare bones," said Anna promptly. "With plenty of tooth marks on them. Well, did you get them told?"

"Yes," I said, "but they didn't want to believe me. It was too tame. And of course Mrs. McVey didn't like being pushed out on a limb about the Francher kid's clothes. Her delicate hint about the high cost of clothes didn't impress Mrs. Holmes much, not with her six boys. I guess I've got me an enemy for life. She got a good-sized look at herself through my eyes and she didn't like it at all, but I'll bet the Francher kid won't turn up levi'd for a dance again."

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"Heaven send he'll never do anything worse," Anna intoned piously.

That's what I hoped fervently for a while, but lightning hit Willow Creek anyway, a subtle slow lightning—a calculated, coldly angry lightning. I held my breath as report after report came in. Turbows' old shed exploded without a sound on the stroke of nine o'clock Tuesday night and scattered itself as kindling wood over the whole barnyard. Of course Turbows had talked for years of tearing the shaky old thing down but— I began to wonder how you went about bailing a juvenile out of the clink.

Then the last sound timber on the old railroad bridge below Thurmans' house shuddered and dissolved loudly into sawdust at eleven o'clock Tuesday night. The rails, deprived of their support, trembled briefly, then curled tightly *up* into two absurd rosettes. The bridge being gone meant an hour's brisk walk to town for Thurmans instead of a fifteen-minute stroll. It also meant safety for the toddlers too young to understand why the rotting timbers weren't a wonderful kind of jungle-gym.

Wednesday evening at five, all the water in Holmes' pond geysered up and crashed down again, pureeing what few catfish were still left in it and breaking a spillway over into the creek, thereby draining the stagnant old mosquito-bearing spot with a conclusive slurp. As the neighbors had nagged at Holmes to do for years—but . . .

I was awestruck at this simple, literal translation of my words, and searched my memory with wary apprehensiveness. Almost I could have relaxed by now if I could have drawn a line through the last two names on my mental roll of the club.

But Thursday night there was a crash and a roar and I huddled in my bed praying a wordless prayer against I didn't know what and Friday morning I listened to the shrill wide-eyed recitals at the breakfast table.

"—since the devil was an imp and now there it is—"

"—right in the middle, big as life and twice as natural—"

"What is?" I asked, braving the battery of eyes that pinned me like a moth in a covey of searchlights.

There was a stir around the table. Everyone was aching to speak, but there's always a certain rough protocol to be observed, even in a boarding house.

Ol' Charlie cleared his throat, took a huge mouthful of coffee and sloshed it thoughtfully and noisily around his teeth before swallowing it.

"Balance rock," he choked, spraying his vicinity finely, "came

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plumb unbalanced last night. Came a-crashing down, bouncing like a dang ping-pong ball an'nen it hopped over half a dozen fences an'nen *whammo!* it lit on a couple of Scudders' pigs an'nen tore out a section of Lelands' stone fence and now it's settin there in the middle of their alfalfa field as big as a house. He'll have a helk of a time mowing that field now." He slurped largely of his coffee.

"Strange things going on around here." Blue Nor's porchy eyebrows rose and fell portentously. "Never heard of a balance rock falling before. And all them other funny things. The Devil's walking our land, sure enough!"

I left on the wave of violent argument between proponents of the devil theory and the atom bomb testing theory as the prime cause. Now I could draw another line through the list. But what of the last name? What of it?

That afternoon the Francher kid materialized on the bottom step at the boarding house, his eyes intent on my braces. We sat there in silence for a while, mostly I suppose because I could think of nothing rational to say. Finally I decided to be irrational.

"What about Mrs. McVey?"

He shrugged. "She feeds me," he said.

"And what's with the Scudders' pigs?"

Color rose blotchily to his cheeks. "I goofed," he said. "I was aiming for the fence and let it go too soon."

"I told all those ladies the truth Monday," I said. "They knew they had been wrong about you and Twyla. There was no need—"

"No need!" His eyes flashed and I blinked away from the impact of his straight, indignant glare. "They're dern lucky I didn't smash them all flat."

"I know," I said hastily. "I know how you feel, but I can't congratulate you on your restraint because however little you did compared to what you might have done, it was still more than you had a right to do. Especially the pigs and the wall."

"I didn't mean the pigs," he muttered as he fingered a patch on his knee. "Old man Scudder's a pretty right guy."

"Yes," I said. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I could swipe some pigs from somewhere else for him, but I suppose that wouldn't fix things."

"No, it wouldn't," I said. "You should buy—do you have any money?"

"Not for pigs!" He flared. "All I have is what I'm saving for my musical instrument and not one penny of that'll ever go for pigs!"

"All right, all right," I said. "You figure out something."

He ducked his head again, fingering the patch, and I watched the late sun run across the curve

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of his cheek, thinking what an odd conversation this was.

"Francher," I said leaning forward impulsively. "Do you ever wonder how come you can do the things you do?"

His eyes were quick on my face. "Do you ever wonder why you *can't* do what you can't do?"

I flushed and shifted my crutches. "I *know* why," I said.

"No you don't," he said. "You only know when your Can't began. You don't know the real why. Even your doctors don't know all of it. Well, I don't know the why of my Cans. I don't even know the beginning of them, only that sometimes I feel a wave of something inside me that hollers to get out of all the Can'ts that are around me like you can't do this, you can't do that and then I *remember* that I can."

He flicked his fingers and my crutches stirred. They lifted and thudded softly down the steps and then up again to lean back in their accustomed place.

"Crutches *can't* walk," said the Francher kid. "But you— Something besides your body musta got smashed in that wreck."

"Everything got smashed," I said bitterly, the cold horror of that night and all that followed choking my chest. "Everything ended—everything."

"There aren't any endings," said the Francher kid. "Only new beginnings. When you going to get started?" Then he slouched away, his hands in his pockets, his head bent as he kicked a rock along the path. Bleakly I watched him go, trying to keep alive my flame of anger at him.

Well, Lelands' wall had to be rebuilt and it was the Francher kid that got the job. He toiled mightily, lifting the heavy stones and cracking his hands with the dehydrating effect of the mortar he used. Maybe the fence wasn't as straight as it had been, but it was repaired and perhaps, I hoped, a stone had been set strongly somewhere in the Francher kid by this act of atonement. That he received pay for it didn't detract too much from the act itself—especially considering the amount of pay, and the fact that it all went in on the other reparation.

The appearance of two strange pigs in Scudders' east field created quite a stir, but the wonder of it was dulled by all the odd events proceeding it. Mr. Scudder made inquiries but nothing ever came of them so he kept the pigs, and I made no inquiries but relaxed for a while about the Francher kid.

V

It was along about this time that a Dr. Curtis came to town briefly. Well, came to town is a

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euphemism. His car broke down on his way up into the hills and he had to accept our hospitality until Bill Thurman could get around to finding a necessary part. He stayed at Somansons' in a room opposite mine after Mrs. Somanson had frantically cleared it out, mostly by the simple expedient of shoving all the boxes and crates and odds and ends to the end of the hall and draping a tarp over them. Then she splashed water across the barely settled dust and mopped out the resultant mud, put a brick under one corner of the bed, made it up with two army surplus mattresses, one sheet edged with crocheted lace, and one of heavy unbleached muslin. She unearthed a pillow that fluffed beautifully but sighed itself to a wafer-thin odor of damp feathers at a touch, and topped the splendid whole with two hand-pieced, hand-quilted quilts and a chenille spread with a technicolor peacock flamboyantly dominating it.

"There," she sighed, using her apron to dust the edge of the dresser where it showed along the edge of the dresser scarf, "I guess that'll hold him."

"I should hope so," I smiled. "It's probably the quickest room he's ever had."

"He's lucky to have this at such short notice," she said, turning the rag rug over so the burned place wouldn't show. "If it wasn't that I had my eye on that new winter coat—"

Dr. Curtis was a very relaxing, comfortable sort of fellow and it seemed so good to have someone to talk to who cared to use words of more than two syllables. It wasn't that the people in Willow Creek were ignorant, they just didn't usually care to discuss three-syllable matters. I guess, besides the conversation, I was drawn to Dr. Curtis because he neither looked at my crutches nor not looked at them. It was pleasant except for the twinge of here's-someone-who-has-never-known-me-without-them.

After supper that night, we all sat around the massive oil burner in the front room and talked against the monotone background of the radio turned low. Of course the late shake-making events in the area were brought up. Dr. Curtis was most interested—especially in the rails that curled up into rosettes. Because he was a doctor and a stranger, the group expected an explanation of these goings-on from him, or at least an educated guess.

"What do I think?" He leaned forward in the old rocker and rested his arms on his knees. "I think a lot of things happen that can't be explained by our usual thought patterns, and once we get accustomed to certain patterns we find it very uncomfortable to break over into others. So

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maybe it's just as well not to want an explanation."

"Hmmm." Ol' Charlie knocked the ashes out of his pipe into his hand and looked around for the waste basket. "Neat way of saying you don't know either. Think I'll remember that. It might come in handy sometime. Well, g'night all." He glanced around hastily, dumped the ashes in the geranium pot, and left, sucking on his empty pipe.

His departure was a signal for the others to drift off to bed at the wise hour of ten, but I was in no mood for wisdom, not of the early-to-bed type, anyway.

"Then there *is* room in this life for inexplicables." I pleated my skirt between my fingers and straightened it out again.

"It would be a poor, lackluster sort of world if there weren't," the doctor said. "I used to rule out anything that I couldn't explain, but I got cured of that good one time." He smiled reminiscently. "Sometimes I wish I hadn't. As I said, it can be mighty uncomfortable."

"Yes," I said impulsively. "Like hearing impossible music and sliding down moonbeams—" I felt my heart sink at the sudden blankness of his face. Oh, gheel Goofed again. He could talk glibly of inexplicables, but he didn't really believe in them. "And crutches that walk by themselves," I rushed on rashly, "and autumn leaves that dance in the windless clearing—" I grasped my crutches and started blindly for the door. "And maybe some day if I'm a good girl and disbelieve enough, I'll walk again—"

" 'And disbelieve enough'?" His words followed me. "Don't you mean believe enough?"

"Don't strain your pattern," I called back. "It's 'disbelieve.' "

Of course I felt silly the next morning at the breakfast table, but Dr. Curtis didn't refer to the conversation so I didn't either. He was discussing renting a jeep for his hunting trip and leaving his car to be fixed.

"Tell Bill you'll be back a week before you plan to," said Ol' Charlie. "Then your car will be ready when you do get back."

The Francher kid was in the group of people who gathered to watch Bill transfer Dr. Curtis' gear from the car to the jeep. As usual he was a little removed from the rest, lounging against a tree. Dr. Curtis finally came out, his 30-06 under one arm and his heavy hunting jacket under the other. Anna and I leaned over our side fence watching the whole procedure.

I saw the Francher kid straighten slowly, his hands leaving his pockets as he stared at Dr. Curtis. One hand went out tentatively and then faltered. Dr. Curtis inserted himself in the seat

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of the jeep and fumbled at the knobs on the dashboard. "Which one's the radio?" he asked Bill.

"Radio? In this jeep?" Bill laughed.

"But the music—" Dr. Curtis paused for a split second, then turned on the ignition. "Have to make my own, I guess," he laughed.

The jeep roared into life and the small group scattered as he wheeled it in reverse across the yard. In the pause as he shifted gears, he glanced sideways at me and our eyes met. It was a very brief encounter, but he asked questions and I answered with my un-knowing and he exploded in a kind of wonderment—all in the moment between reverse and low.

We watched the dust boil up behind the jeep as it growled its way down to the highway.

"Well," said Anna, "a-hunting we do go indeed!"

"Who's he?" The Francher kid's hands were tight on the top of the fence, a blind sort of look on his face.

"I don't know," I said. "His name is Dr. Curtis."

"He's heard music before."

"I should hope so," said Anna.

"*That* music?" I asked the Francher kid.

"Yes," he nearly sobbed. "Yes!"

"He'll be back," I said. "He has to get his car."

"Well," sighed Anna. "The words are the words of English, but the sense is the sense of confusion. Coffee, anybody?"

That afternoon the Francher kid joined me, wordlessly, as I struggled up the rise above the boarding house for a little wideness of horizon to counteract the day's shut-in-ness. I would rather have walked alone, partly because of a need for silence and partly because he just couldn't ever keep his—accusing?—eyes off my crutches. But he didn't trespass upon my attention as so many people would have, so I didn't mind too much. I leaned, panting, against a gray granite boulder and let the fresh-from-distant-snow breeze lift my hair as I caught my breath. Then I huddled down into my coat, warming my ears. The Francher kid had a handful of pebbles and was lobbing them at the scattered rusty tin cans that dotted the hillside. After one pebble turned a square corner to hit a can, he spoke.

"If he knows the name of the instrument, then—" He lost his words.

"What is the name?" I asked, rubbing my nose where my coat collar had tickled it.

"It really isn't a word," he said. "It's just two sounds it makes."

"Well, then, make me a word," I said. "'Musical instrument' is mighty unmusical and unhandy."

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The Francher kid listened, his head tilted, his lips moving. "I suppose you could call it a *rappoor*," he said, softening the *a*. "But it isn't that."

"*Rappoor*," I said. "Of course you know by now we don't have any such instrument." I was intrigued at having been drawn into another Francher-type conversation. I was developing quite a taste for them. "It's probably just something your mother dreamed up for you."

"And for that doctor?" he asked.

"Ummm." My mental wheels spun, tractionless. "What do you think?"

"I almost know," he said, "that there are some more like mother. Some who know 'the madness and The Dream' too."

"Dr. Curtis?" I asked.

"No," he said slowly, rubbing his hand along the boulder. "No. I could feel a far-away, strange-to-me feeling with him. He's like you. He—he knows someone who knows, but he doesn't know."

"Well, thanks," I said. "He's a nice bird to be a feather of. Then it's all very simple. When he comes back, you ask him who he knows."

"Yes . . ." The Francher kid drew a tremulous breath. "Yes!"

We eased down the hillside, talking money and music. The Francher kid had enough saved up to buy a good instrument of some kind . . . but what kind? He was immersed in tones and timbres and ranges and keys and the possibility of sometime finding a something that would sound like a *rappoor*.

We paused at the foot of the hill. Impulsively I spoke.

"Francher, why do you talk with me?" I wished the words back before I finished them. Words have a ghastly way of shattering delicate situations and snapping tenuous bonds.

He lobbed a couple more stones against the bank and turned away, hands in his pockets. His words came back to me after I had given them up.

"You don't hate me—yet."

I was jarred. I suppose I had imagined all the people around the Francher kid were getting acquainted with him as I was, but his words made me realize differently. After that I caught at every conversation that included the Francher kid, and alerted at every mention of his name. It shook me to find that to practically everyone he was still juvenile delinquent, lazy trash, no-good off-scouring, potential criminal, burden. By some devious means it had been decided that he was responsible for all the odd happenings in town. I asked a number of people how the kid could possibly have done it. The only answer I got was "The Francher kid can do anything—bad."

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Even Anna still found him an unwelcome burden in her classroom despite the fact that he was finally functioning on a fairly acceptable level academically.

Here I'd been thinking—Heaven knows why!—that he was establishing himself in the community. Instead he was doing well to hold his own. I reviewed to myself all that had happened since first I met him and found hardly a thing that would be positive in the eyes of the general public.

"Why," I thought to myself, "I'm darned lucky he's kept out of the hands of the law!" And my stomach knotted coldly at what might happen if the Francher kid ever did step over into out-and-out lawlessness. There's something insidiously sweet to the adolescent in flouting authority and I wanted no such appetite for any My Child of mine.

Well, the next few days after Dr. Curtis left were typical hunting weather days. Minutes of sunshine and shouting autumn colors —hours of cloud and rain and near snow and raw, aching winds. Reports came of heavy snow across Mingus Mountain and Dogietown was snowed in for the winter, a trifle earlier than usual. We watched our own first flakes idle down, then whip themselves to tears against the huddled houses. It looked as though all excitement and activity were about to be squeezed out of Willow Springs by the drab grayness of winter.

Then the unexpected, which sometimes splashes our grayness with scarlet, happened. The big dude-ranch school, the Half Circle Star, that occupied the choicest of the range land in our area, invited all the school kids out to a musical splurge. They had imported an orchestra that played concerts as well as being a very good dance band, and they planned a gala weekend with a concert Friday evening followed by a dance for the teeners Saturday night. The Ranch students were usually kept aloof from the town kids, poor little tikes. They were mostly unwanted or maladjusted children whose parents could afford to get rid of them with a flourish under the guise of giving them the advantage of growing up in healthful surroundings.

Of course the whole town was flung into a tizzy. There were the children of millionaires out there and famous people's kids too, but about the only glimpse we ever got of them was as they swept grandly through the town in the Ranch station wagons. On such occasions, we collectively blinked our eyes at the chromium glitter, and sighed—though perhaps for different reasons. I sighed for thin, unhappy faces pressed to windows and sad eyes yearning back at houses where families lived who wanted *their* kids.

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Anyway, the concensus of opinion was that it would be worth suffering through a "music concert" to get to go to a dance with a real orchestra—because only those who attended the concert were eligible for the dance.

There was much discussion and much heart-burning over what to wear to the two so divergent affairs. The boys were complacent after they found out that their one good outfit was right for both. The girls discussed endlessly, and embarked upon a wild lend-borrow spree when they found that fathers positively refused to spend largely even for this so special occasion.

I was very pleased for the Francher kid. Now he'd have a chance to hear live music—a considerable cut above what snarled in on our staticky wave lengths from the available radio stations. Now maybe he'd hear a faint echo of his *rappoor* and in style too, because Mrs. McVey had finally broken down and bought him a new suit, a really nice one by the local standards. I was as anxious as Twyla to see how the Francher kid would look in such splendor.

So it was with a distinct shock that I saw the kid at the concert, lounging, thumbs in pockets, against the door of the room where the crowd gathered. His face was shut and dark and his patched, faded levis made a blotch in the dimness of the room.

"Look!" whispered Twyla. "He's in levis!"

"How come?" I breathed. "Where's his new suit?"

"I don't know," she answered. "And those levis aren't even clean!" And she hunched down in her seat, feeling the accusing eyes of the whole world searing her through the Francher kid.

The concert was splendid. Even our rockin'est rollers were caught up in the wonderful web of music. Even I lost myself for long, lovely moments in the bright melodic trails that led me out of the gray lanes of familiarity. But I also felt the bite of tears behind my eyes. Music is made to be moved to and my unresponsive feet wouldn't even tap a tempo. I let the brasses and drums smash my rebellion into bearable-sized pieces again and joined joyfully in the enthusiastic applause.

"Hey!" said Rigo behind me as the departing stir of the crowd began. "I didn't know anything could sound like that. Man! Did you hear that horn! I'd like to get me one of them things and blow it!"

"You'd sound like a sick cow," said Janniset. "Them's hard to play."

Their discussion moved on down the aisle.

"He's gone." Twyla's voice was a breath in my ear.

"Yes," I said. "But we'll probably see him out at the bus."

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But we didn't. He wasn't at the bus. He hadn't come out on the bus. No one knew how he got out to the ranch or where he had gone.

Anna and Twyla and I piled into Anna's car and headed back for Willow Creek, my heart thudding with apprehension, my thoughts busy. When we pulled up at Somansons', there was a car parked in front.

"The McVey!" Anna sizzled in my ear. "Ah ha! Methinks I smell trouble."

I didn't even have time to take my coat off in the smothery warmth of the front room before I was confronted by the monumental violence of Mrs. McVey's wrath.

"Dress him!" she hissed, her chin thrust out as she lunged forward in the chair. "Dress him so's he'll feel equal to the others!" Her hands flashed out and I dodged instinctively and blinked as a bunch of white rags fluttered to my feet. "His new shirt!" she half-screamed. Another shower of tatters—dark ones this time. "His new suit! Not a piece in it as big as your hand!" There was a spatter like muffled hail. "His shoes!" Her voice caught on the edge of her violence and she repeated raggedly, "His *shoes*!" Fear was battling with anger now. "Look at those pieces—as big as stamps —*shoes*!" Her voice broke. "Anybody who can tear up *shoes*!"

She sank back in her chair, spent and breathless, fishing for a crumpled kleenex to wipe the spittle from her chin. I eased into a chair after Anna helped me shrug out of my coat. Twyla huddled, frightened, near the door, her eyes big with fascinated terror.

"Let him be like the others," McVey half-whispered. "That limb of Satan ever be like anyone decent?"

"But why?" My voice sounded thin and high in the calm after the hurricane.

"For no reason at all," she gasped, pressing her hand to her panting ribs. "I gave all them brand new clothes to him to try on, thinking he'd be pleased. Thinking"— her voice slipped to a whining tremolo—"thinking he'd see how I had his best interest at heart." She paused and sniffed lugubriously. No ready sympathy for her poured into the hiatus so she went on, angrily aggrieved. "And he took them and went into his room and came out with them like that!" Her finger jabbed at the pile of rags. "He—he *threw* them at me! You and your big ideas about him wanting to be like other kids!" Her lips curled away from the venomous spate of words. "He don't want to be like nobody 'cepting hisself. And he's a devil!" Her voice sank to a whisper and her breath drew in on the last word, her eyes wide.

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"But why did he do it?" I asked. "He must have said *something*."

Mrs. McVey folded her hands across her ample middle and pinched her lips together. "There are some things a lady don't repeat," she said prissily, tossing her head.

"Oh, cut it out!" I was suddenly dreadfully weary of trying to be polite to the McVey's of this world. "Stop tying on that kind of an act. You could teach a stevedore—" I bit my lips and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Mrs. McVey, but this is no time to hold back. What did he say? What excuse did he give?"

"He didn't give any excuse," she snapped. "He just—just—" Her heavy cheeks mottled with color. "He called names."

"Oh." Anna and I exchanged glances.

"But what on earth got into him?" I asked. "There must be some reason—"

"Well," Anna squirmed a little. "After all, what can you expect—"

"From a background like that?" I snapped. "Well, Anna, I certainly expected something different from a background like yours!"

Anna's face hardened and she gathered up her things. "I've known him longer than you have," she said quietly.

"Longer," I admitted, "but not better. Anna," I pleaded, leaning towards her. "Don't condemn him unheard."

"Condemn?" She looked up brightly. "I didn't know he was on trial."

"Oh, Anna." I sank back in my chair. "The poor kid's been on trial, presumed guilty of anything and everything ever since he arrived in town and you know it."

"I don't want to quarrel with you," Anna said. "I'd better say good night."

The door clicked to behind her. Mrs. McVey and I measured each other with our eyes. I had opened my mouth to say something when I felt a whisper of a motion at my elbow. Twyla stood under the naked flood of the overhead light, her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes shadowed by the droop of her lashes as she narrowed her glance against the glare.

"What did you buy his clothes with?" Her voice was very quiet.

"None of your business, young lady," snapped Mrs. McVey, reddening.

"This is almost the end of the month," said Twyla. "Your check doesn't come till the first. Where did you get the money?"

"*Well!*" Mrs. McVey began to hoist her bulk out of the chair. "I don't have to stay here and have a sassy snip like this—"

Twyla swept in closer—so close that Mrs. McVey shrank back, her hands gripping the dusty, overstuffed arms of the chair.

"You never have any of the check left after the first week,"

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said Twyla. "And you bought a purple nylon night gown this month. It took a week's pay—"

Mrs. McVey lunged forward again, her mouth agape with horrified outrage.

"You took *his* money," said Twyla, her eyes steely in her tight young face. "You stole the money he was saving!" She whirled away from the chair, her skirts and hair flaring. "Someday," she said with clenched teeth, "someday I'll probably be old and fat and ugly, but heaven save me from being old and fat and ugly and a *thief*!"

"Twyla!" I warned, truly afraid that Mrs. McVey would have a stroke then and there.

"Well, she *is* a thief!" cried Twyla. "The Francher kid has been working and saving almost a year to buy—" She faltered, palpably feeling the thin ice of betraying a confidence. "To buy something. And he had almost enough! And she must have gone snooping around—"

"Twyla!" I had to stop her.

"It's true! It's true!" Her hands clenched rebelliously.

"Twyla." My voice was quiet, but it silenced her.

"Goodby, Mrs. McVey," I said. "I'm sorry this happened."

"Sorry!" she snorted, rearing up out of her chair. "Sour old maids with never a chick or child of their own sticking their noses into decent people's affairs—" She waddled hastily to the door. She reached for the doorknob, her eyes narrow and venomous over her shoulder. "I got connections," she said. "I'll get even with you." The door shuddered as it emphasized her departure.

I let the McVey sweep out of my mind.

"Twyla." I took her cold hands in mine. "You'd better go on home. I've got to figure out how to find the Francher kid."

The swift movement of her hands protested. "But *I* want—"

"I'm sorry, Twyla," I said. "I think it'd be better."

"OK." Her shoulders relaxed in acquiescence.

Just as she left, Mrs. Somanson bustled in. "Y' better come on out to the table and have a cup of coffee," she said. I straightened wearily.

"That McVey! She'd drive the devil to drink," she said cheerfully. "Well, I guess people are like that. I've had more teachers over the years say that it wasn't the kids they minded, but the parents." She shooed me through the door and went to the kitchen for the percolator. "Now, I was always one to believe that the teacher was right—right or wrong —" Her voice faded out in a long familiar story that proved just the opposite of what she'd said, as I stared into my cup of coffee, wondering despairingly where in all this world I could find the Fran-

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cher kid. After the episode of the gossip, I had my fears. Still, oftentimes people who react violently to comparatively minor troubles, were seemingly unshaken by really serious ones—a sort of being at a loss for a proportionate emotional reaction.

But what would he do? Music—music—he'd planned to buy the means for music and had lost the wherewithal. Now he had nothing to make music with. What would he do first? Revenge—or find his music elsewhere? Run away? To where? Steal the money? Steal the music?—*Steal!*

I snapped to awareness, my abrupt movement slopping my cold coffee over into the saucer. Mrs. Somanson was gone. The house was quiet with the twilight pause—the indefinable transitional phase from day to night.

This time it wouldn't be only a harmonica! I groped for my crutches, my mind scrabbling for some means of transportation. I was reaching for the doorknob when the door flew open and nearly bowled me over.

"Coffee! Coffee!" croaked Dr. Curtis, to my complete bewilderment. He staggered over, all bundled in his hunting outfit, his face ragged with whiskers, his clothes odorous of campfires and all out-of-doors, to the table and clutched the coffee pot. It was very obviously cold.

"Oh, well," he said in a conversational tone. "I guess I can survive without coffee."

"Survive what?" I asked.

He looked at me a moment, smiling, then he said, "Well, if I'm going to say anything about it to anyone it might as well be you, though I hope that I've got sense enough not to go around babbling indiscriminately. Of, course, it might be a slight visual hangover from this hunting trip—you should hunt with these friends of mine sometime—but it kinda shook me."

"Shook you?" I repeated stupidly, my mind racing around the idea of asking him for help in finding the Francher kid.

"A somewhatly," he admitted. "After all, there I was, riding along, minding my own business, singing, lustily if not musically, 'A Life On The Ocean Wave,' when there they were, marching sedately across the road."

"They?" This story dragged in my impatient ears.

"The trombone and the big bass drum," he explained.

VI

"The what!" I had the sensation of running unexpectedly into a mad tangle of briars.

"The trombone and the big bass drum," Dr. Curtis repeated. "Keeping perfect time and no doubt in perfect step, though you couldn't thump your feet con-

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vincingly six feet off the ground. Supposing, of course, you were a trombone with feet which this wasn't."

"Dr. Curtis." I grabbed a corner of his hunting coat. "Please, *please*! What happened? Tell me! I've got to know."

He looked at me and sobered. "You are taking this seriously, aren't you?" he said wonderingly.

I gulped and nodded.

"Well, it was about five miles above the Half Circle Star Ranch, where the heavy pine growth begins. And so help me, a trombone and a bass drum marched in the air across the road, the bass drum marking the time—though come to think of it, the drum sticks just lay on top. I stopped the jeep and ran over to where they had disappeared. I couldn't see anything in the heavy growth there, but I swear I heard a faint Bronx cheer from the trombone. I have no doubt that the two of them were hiding behind a tree, snickering at me." He rubbed his hand across his fuzzy chin. "Maybe I'd better drink that coffee, cold or not."

"Dr. Curtis," I said urgently. "Can you help me? Without waiting for questions? Can you take me out there? Right now?" I reached for my coat. Wordlessly, he helped me on with it and opened the door for me. The day was gone and the sky was a clear aqua around the horizon, shading into rose where the sun had dropped behind the hills. It was only a matter of minutes before we were roaring up the hill to the junction. I shouted over the jolting rattle.

"It's the Francher kid," I yelled. "I've got to find him and make him put them back before they find out."

"Put who back where?" shouted Dr. Curtis into the sudden diminution of noise as we topped the rise, much to the astonishment of Mrs. Frisney who was pattering across the intersection with her black umbrella protecting her from the early starshine.

"It's too long to explain," I screamed as we accelerated down the highway. "But he must be stealing the whole orchestra because Mrs. McVey bought him a new suit, and I've got to make him take them back or they'll arrest him, then Heaven help us all."

"You mean the Francher kid had that bass drum and trombone?" he yelled.

"Yes!" My chest was aching from the tension of speech. "And probably all the rest."

I caught myself with barked knuckles as Dr. Curtis braked to a sudden stop.

"Now look," he said, "Let's get this straight. You're talking wilder than I am. Do you mean to say that that kid is swiping a whole orchestra?"

"Yes," I said, "Don't ask me

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how. I don't know how, but he can do it—" I grabbed his sleeve. "But he said you knew! The day you left on your trip, I mean, he said you knew someone who would know. We were waiting for you!"

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he said in slow wonder. "Well, dang me!" He ran his hand over his face. "So now it's *my* turn!" He reached for the ignition key. "Gangway, Jemmy!" he shouted. "Here I come with Another! Yours or mine, Jemmy? Yours or mine?"

It was as though his outlandish words had tripped a trigger. Suddenly all this strangeness, this out-of-stepness became a mad foolishness. Despairingly I wished I'd never seen Willow Creek or the Francher kid or a harmonica that danced alone or Twyla's tilted side-glance, or Dr. Curtis or the white road dimming in the rapid coming of night. I huddled down in my coat, my eyes stinging with weary, hopeless tears, and the only comfort I could find was in visualizing me twisting my hated braces into rigid confetti and spattering the road with it.

I roused as Dr. Curtis braked the jeep to a stop.

"It was about there," he said, peering through the dusk. "It's mighty deserted up here—the raw end of isolation. The kid's probably scared by now and plenty willing to come home."

"Not the Francher kid," I said. "He's not the run-of-the-mill type kid."

"Oh, so!" said Dr. Curtis. "I'd forgotten."

Then there it was. At first I thought it the evening wind in the pines, but it deepened and swelled and grew into a thunderous, magnificent, shaking chord—a whole orchestra giving tongue. Then, one by one, the instruments soloed, running their scales, displaying their intervals, parading their possibilities. Somewhere between the strings and woodwinds, I eased out of the jeep.

"You stay here," I half-whispered. "I'll go find him. You wait."

It was like walking through a rainstorm, the notes spattering all around me, the shrill lightning of the piccolos and the muttering thunder of the drums. There was no melody, only a child running gleefully through a candy store, snatching greedily at everything, gathering delight by the handful and throwing it away for the sheer pleasure of having enough to be able to throw it.

I struggled up the rise above the road, forgetting in my preoccupation to be wary of unfamiliar territory in the half dark. There they were—in the sand hollow beyond the rise—all the instruments ranged in orderly precise rows as though at the recital, each one wrapped in a sudden, shadowy silence, broken only by

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the shivery giggle of the cymbals which hastily stilled themselves against the sand.

"Who's there?" He was a rigid figure, poised atop a boulder, arms half lifted.

"Francher," I said.

"Oh." He slid through the air to me. "I'm not hiding any more," he said. "I'm going to be me all the time now."

"Francher," I said bluntly, "you're a thief."

He jerked in protest. "I'm not either—"

"If this is being you," I said, "you're a thief. You stole these instruments."

He groped for words then burst out. "They stole my money! They stole all my music."

"They?" I asked. "Francher, you can't lump people together and call them *'they.'* Did I steal your money? Or Twyla—or Mrs. Frisney—or Rigo?"

"Maybe you didn't put your hands on it," said the Francher kid. "But you stood around and let McVey take it."

"That's a guilt humanity has shared since the beginning," I said. "Standing around and letting wrong things happen. But even Mrs. McVey felt she was helping you. She didn't sit down and decide to rob you. Some people have the idea that children don't have any exclusive possessions, but what they have belongs to the adults who care for them. Mrs. McVey thinks that way. Which is quite a different thing from deliberately stealing from strangers. What about the owners of all these instruments? What have they done to deserve your ill-will?"

"They're people," he said stubbornly. "And I'm not going to be people any more." Slowly he lifted himself into the air and turned himself upside down. "See," he said, hanging above the hillside. "People can't do things like this."

"No," I said. "But apparently whatever kind of creature you have decided to be can't keep their shirt tails in either."

Hastily he scrabbled his shirt back over his bare midriff and righted himself. There was an awkward silence in the shadowy hollow; then I asked:

"What are you going to do about the instruments?"

"Oh, they can have them back when I'm through with them—if they can find them," he said contemptuously. "I'm going to play them to pieces tonight." The trumpet jabbed brightly through the dusk and the violins shimmered a silver obbligato.

"And every downbeat will say *'thief,'* " I said, "And every roll of the drums will growl *'stolen.'* "

"I don't care, I don't care!" he almost yelled. " *'Thief'* and *'stolen'* are words for people and I'm not going to be people any more, I told you!"

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"What are you going to be?" I asked, leaning wearily against a tree trunk. "An animal?"

"No sir." He was having trouble deciding what to do with his hands. "I'm going to be *more* than just a human."

"Well, for a more-than-human, this kind of behavior doesn't show very many smarts," I said. "If you're going to be more than human, you have to be thoroughly a human first. If you're going to be better than a human, you have to be the best a human can be, first—then go on from there. Being entirely different is no way to make a big impression on people. You have to be able to outdo them at their own game first and then go beyond them. It won't matter to them that you can fly like a bird unless you can walk straight like a man, first. To most people 'different' is 'wrong'. Oh, they'd probably say, 'My goodness! How wonderful!' when you first pulled some fancy trick, but"— I hesitated, wondering if I were being wise— "but they'd forget you pretty quick, just as they would any cheap carnival attraction."

He jerked at my words, his fists clenched.

"You're as bad as the rest." His words were tight and bitter. "You think I'm just a freak—"

"I think you're an unhappy person," I said, "because you're not sure who you are or what you are, but you'll have a much worse time trying to make an identity for yourself if you tangle with the law."

"The law doesn't apply to me," he said coldly. "Because I know who I am—"

"Do you, Francher?" I asked softly. "Where did your mother come from? Why could she walk through the minds of others? Who are you, Francher? Are you going to cut yourself off from people before you even try to find out just what wonders you are capable of? Not these little sideshow deals, but maybe miracles that really count." I swallowed hard as I looked at his averted face, shadowy in the dusk. My own face was congealing from the cold wind that had risen, but he didn't even shiver in its iciness though he had no jacket on. My lips moved stiffly. "Both of us know you could get away with this lawlessness, but you know as well as I do that if you take this first step, you won't ever be able to untake it. And, how do we know, it might make it impossible for you to be accepted by your own kind—if you're right in saying there are others. Surely they're above common theft. And Dr. Curtis is due back from his hunting trip. So close to knowing—maybe—

"I didn't know your mother, Francher, but I do know this is not The Dream she had for you. This is not why she endured Hun-

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ger and Hiding, Terror and Panic Places—"

I turned and stumbled away from him, making my way back to the road. It was dark—horribly dark around me and in me as I wailed soundlessly for this My Child. Somewhere before I got back, Dr. Curtis was helping me. He got me back into the jeep and pried my frozen fingers from my crutches and warmed my hands between his broad-gloved palms.

"He *isn't* of this world, you know," he said. "At least his parents or grandparents weren't. There are others like him. I've been hunting with some of them. He doesn't know, evidently, nor did his mother, but he *can* find his People. I wanted to tell you to help you persuade him—"

I started to reach for my crutches, peering through the dark, then I relaxed. "No," I said with tingling lips. "It wouldn't be any good if he only responded to bribes. He has to decide now, with the scales weighted against him. He's got to *push* into his new world. He can't just slide in limply. You kill a chick if you help it hatch."

I dabbled all the way home at tears for a My Child, lost in a wilderness I couldn't chart, bound in a captivity from which I couldn't free him.

Dr. Curtis saw me to the door of my room. He lifted my averted face and wiped it.

"Don't worry," he said. "I promise you the Francher kid will be taken care of."

"Yes," I said, closing my eyes against the nearness of his. "By the Sheriff if they catch him. They'll discover the loss of the orchestra any minute now, if they haven't already."

"You made him think," he said. "He wouldn't have stood still for all that if you hadn't."

"Too late," I said. "A thought too late."

Alone in my room I huddled on my bed, trying not to think of anything. I lay there until I was stiff with the cold, then I crept into my night clothes and buttoned my warm woolly robe up to my chin. I sat in the darkness there by the window, looking out at the lacy ghosts of the cottonwood trees, in the dim moonlight. How long would it be before some kindly soul would come blundering in to regale me with the latest about the Francher kid?

I put my elbows on the window sill and leaned my face on my hands, the heels of my palms pressing against my eyes. *Oh Francher, My Child, My lonely lost Child . . .*

"I'm not lost."

I lifted a startled face. The voice was so soft. Maybe I had imagined—

"No, I'm here." The Francher kid stepped out into the milky

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glow of the moon, moving with a strange new strength and assurance, quite divorced from his usual teen-age gangling.

"Oh, Francher—" I couldn't let myself sob, but my voice caught on the last of his name.

"It's OK," he said. "I took them all back."

My shoulders ached as the tension ran out of them.

"I didn't have time to get them all back in the hall, but I stacked them carefully on the front porch." A glimmer of a smile crossed his face. "I guess they'll wonder how they got out there."

"I'm so sorry about your money," I said awkwardly.

He looked at me soberly. "I can save again. I'll get it yet. Someday I'll have my music. It doesn't *have* to be now."

Suddenly a warm bubble seemed to be pressing up against my lungs. I felt excitement tingle clear out to my fingertips. I leaned across the sill. "Francher," I cried softly. "You *have* your music. Now. Remember the harmonica? Remember when you danced with Twyla? Oh, Francher. All sound is, is vibration. You can vibrate the air without an instrument. Remember the chord you played with the orchestra? Play it again, Francher!"

He looked at me blankly and then it was as if a candle had been lighted behind his face. "Yes!" he cried. "Yes!"

Softly — oh, softly — because miracles come that way, I heard the chord begin. It swelled richly, fully, softly until the whole back yard vibrated to it—a whole orchestra crying out in a whisper in the pale moonlight.

"But the tunes!" he cried, taking this miracle at one stride and leaping beyond it. "I don't know any of the tunes for an orchestra!"

"There are books," I said. "Whole books of scores for symphonies and operas and—"

"And when I know the instruments better!" Here was the eager, alive voice of the-Francher-kid-who-should-be. "Anything I hear—" The back yard ripped raucously to a couple of bars of the latest rock'n'roll, then blossomed softly to an "Adoramus Te" and skipped to "The Farmer In The Dell." "Then some day I'll make my own—" Tremulously a *rappoor* threaded through a melodic phrase and stilled itself.

In the silence that followed, the Francher kid looked at me—not at my face, but deep inside me somewhere.

"Miss Carolle!" I felt my eyes tingle to tears at his voice. "You've given me my music!" I could hear him swallow. "I want to give you something." My hand moved in protest, but he went on quickly, "Please come outside."

"Like this?" I asked. "I'm in my robe and slippers."

"They're warm enough," he

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said. "Here, I'll help you through the window."

And before I knew it, I was over the low sill and clinging dizzily to it from the outside.

"My braces," I said, loathing the words with a horrible loathing. "My crutches."

"No," said the Francher kid. "You don't need them. Walk across the yard, Miss Carolle, all alone."

"I can't!" I cried through my shock. "Oh, Francher, don't tease me!"

"Yes, you can," he said. "That's what I'm giving you. I can't mend you, but I can give you that much. Walk."

I clung frantically to the sill. Then I saw again Francher and Twyla spiraling down from the tree tops, Francher upside down in the air with his midriff showing, Francher bouncing Balance Rock from field to field.

I let go of the sill. I took a step. And another, and another. I held my hands far out from my sides. Glorious freedom from clenched hands and aching elbows! Across the yard I went, every step in the milky moonlight a paean of praise. I turned at the fence and looked back. The Francher kid was crouched by the window in a tight huddle of concentration. I lifted onto tiptoe and half-skipped, half-ran back to the window, feeling the wind of my going lift my hair back from my cheeks. Oh it was like a drink after thirst! Like food after famine! Like gates swinging open!

I fell forward and caught at the window sill. And cried out inarticulately as I felt the old bonds clamp down again, the old half-death seize hold of me. I crumpled to the ground beside the Francher kid. His tormented eyes looked into mine, his face pale and haggard. His forearm went up to wipe his sweat-drenched face. "I'm sorry," he panted. "That's all I can do now."

My hands reached for him. There was a sudden movement, so quick and so close that I drew my foot back out of the way. I looked up, startled. Dr. Curtis and a shadowy someone else were standing over us. But the surprise of their being there was drowned in the sudden up-surge of wonderment.

"It moved!" I cried. "My foot moved. Look! Look! It moved!" And I concentrated on it again—hard, hard! After laborious seconds, my left big toe wiggled.

My hysterical laugh was half a shout. "One toe is better than none!" I sobbed. "Isn't it, Dr. Curtis? Doesn't that mean that someday—that maybe—"

He had dropped to his knees and he gathered my frantic hands into his two big quiet ones.

"It might well be," he said. "Jemmy will help us find out."

The other figure knelt beside

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Dr. Curtis. There was a curious, waiting kind of silence—but it wasn't me he was looking at. It wasn't my hands he reached for. It wasn't my voice that cried out softly.

But it was the Francher kid that suddenly launched himself into the arms of the stranger and began to wail, the wild, noisy crying of a child—a child who could be brave as long as he was completely lost, but who had to dissolve into tears when rescue came.

The stranger looked over the Francher kid's head at Dr. Curtis. "He's mine," he said. "But she's almost one of yours."

It could all have been a dream—or a mad explosion of imagination of some sort; but they don't come any less imaginative than Mrs. McVey, and I know she will never forget the Francher kid. She has another foster child now, a placid, plump little girl who loves to sit and listen to woman talk—but the Francher kid is indelible in the McVey memory. Unborn generations will probably hear of him and his shoes.

And Twyla . . . she will carry his magic to her grave, unless (and I know she sometimes hopes prayerfully) unless Francher someday comes back for her. Because he's gone.

Jemmy, the stranger, took him to Cougar Canyon up in the hills where the others of his kind are gathered—star children, children of The People, the People who came last century to Earth, refugees from a shattered world, scattered over ours by their near-disastrous arrival here. And there at Cougar Canyon they are helping the Francher kid sort out all his many gifts and capabilities—some of which are unique to him—so that he will be able, finally, to fit into his most effective slot in their scheme of things which is so wonderfully, brightly above ours. They tell me that there are those of this world who are developing even now in the footsteps of The People. That's what Jemmy meant when he told Dr. Curtis I was almost one of his.

And I shall walk again. Dr. Curtis brought Bethie, a Sensitive of The People. She only touched me softly with her hands and Read me to Dr. Curtis. And I *had* to accept it then—that it was mostly myself that stood in my own way. That my doctor had been right: that time, patience and believing will make me whole again.

The more I think about The People, about Jemmy and Bethie and the Francher kid, the more I think that those three words are the key to them and to what they hope to do on our earth.

Time, patience and believing—and the greatest of these is believing.

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Nineteen years ago, on August 2, 1939, Albert Einstein wrote to Franklin D. Roosevelt a letter calling the President's attention to the implications and promise of recent researches in nuclear physics. The world-altering results are well known. But a pseudonymous scientist, who has had personal experience with the labyrinthine ways of the Government, suggests that such a letter might not invariably meet with such a response. (My thanks to P. Schuyler Miller, Astounding's *perceptive book reviewer, and to Charles M. Proctor for pointing out this acute satire to me.)*

The Dreistein Case

by J. LINCOLN PAINE

Advanced Research Institute
Cambridge, Massachusetts
2 August 1961

The President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Esteemed Sir:

Some recent work by my colleague, Prof. Hauck of Pretoria, has been communicated to me in manuscript. His findings lead me to believe that scientists may be able to counteract the forces of gravity in the near future. Undoubtedly, if Hauck's new discoveries are further developed and applied, a vast new area of space exploration and missile development will open.

The situation which has arisen seems to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. My colleagues here have urged me to bring this obviously significant development to the attention of the appropriate government authorities. I believe, therefore, that it is my duty to bring to your attention some of the scientific facts which are attached in a separate memorandum.

Of course, my colleagues and I offer our full services towards the further development of this discovery.

Very truly yours,
Egbert Dreistein

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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Special Assistant
to the President
16 August 1961

To: The Secretary of Defense

Attached is copy of letter from Prof. Egbert Dreistein. Draft reply for my signature. Be polite. Incidentally, is there anything to this?

Grant Quincey

INTER-OFFICE
MEMORANDUM
Date: 2 September 1961
Ref.: CPT-201/1

To: Col. T. Lee, OPS
From: The Secretary

Prepare reply to attachment. Is the Institute under contract to the DOD? Quote me their budget figures for the last three fiscal years.

Official Use Only
INTER-OFFICE
MEMORANDUM
Date: 29 June 1962
Ref.: CPT-201/179

To: The Secretary
From: Col. T. Lee, OPS

The matter referred to in your memorandum CPT-201/1 of 2 September 1961 has been referred to an Inter-Service Ad Hoc Committee of staff-rank representatives. The committee concurred that there was no consensus on the problem.

Individual views were as follows:

I. The Army feels that ordinary gravity is not fully understood yet and sees little purpose in extending studies into the field of anti-gravity.

II. The Air Force has been conducting small-scale research on anti-gravity at the TOP SECRET level. However, since it is impossible to extend the concept to fit existing weapons systems, a low priority has been assigned.

III. The Navy has recommended a high priority to anti-anti-gravity investigations under the code name of PLOP.

There is no record in DOD files of a facility clearance for the Advanced Research Institute. Prof. Dreistein has never applied for a "Q" clearance. Given the sensitive nature of the anti-gravity question and the extenuating circumstances, the attached draft reply to Prof. Dreistein has been made as clear as classification permits.

The committee reached agreement on a single point: Prof. Dreistein should not be encouraged. A permanent subcommittee has been set up to provide similar assistance in expediting the handling of any future suggestions from members of the scientific community.

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
Office of the Secretary
2 July 1962

To: Special Assistant to the President

In reference to your request of 16 August 1961, attached is draft reply to Prof. Egbert Dreistein.

The receipt of Prof. Dreistein's letter has stimulated re-examination of the status of anti-gravity research in the Department of Defense. Estimated future budgetary allocations for that type of research do not warrant continuation of the projects which have been under way. Accordingly, I have issued an order that they be curtailed.

Frank Watt

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Special Assistant to the President
5 July 1962

Prof. Egbert Dreistein
The Advanced Research Institute
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Prof. Dreistein:

The President has directed me to reply to your letter of 2 August 1961. We thank you for your interest and assure you that the matter has been investigated by appropriate government agencies.

Your patriotic interest is very much appreciated and the President is always interested in receiving stimulating ideas of that nature.

Yours very truly,
Grant Quincey

MOSCOW, Aug. 5 [1964].—A Soviet spokesman announced today that a manned space station has been established as a satellite around Mars and is now observing landing conditions on that planet.

The achievement was credited to the revolutionary discoveries of Prof. Otto Hauck, formerly of South Africa and now in the Soviet Union. He has been awarded three Lenin prizes for his work. . . .

THE WHITE HOUSE
6 August 1964

Prof. Egbert Dreistein
The Advanced Research Institute
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Prof. Dreistein:

My advisers report to me that you have been interested in the subject of anti-gravity research. Because of the grave circumstances in which our Government finds itself as a result of the announcement from Moscow yesterday, I am asking you to lead a

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new high priority project in that direction.

If you will come to Washington the early part of next week, a briefing will be arranged by representatives of the military services and the Central Intelligence Agency who will be able to give you a little of the historical development of Prof. Hauck's work.

I, as President, personally hope that you and your colleagues will rise to the challenge of this new emergency.

Yours very truly,
Horatio Calvin

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Here is the science fiction debut of one of the Old Reliable Pros in the mystery-suspense field, whose ASSIGNMENT *series of paperback original novels (Gold Medal), about CIA agent Sam Durrell, must rank among today's most effective thrillers of international intrigue. The first book in the series,* ASSIGNMENT TO DISASTER, *had a certain element of s.f., unfortunately inaccurate in its prophecy (it dealt with the successful launching of an American satellite on July 4, 1955); and now Mr. Aarons wholeheartedly invades the future with a lively, tingling melodrama of revolution, spies and strange mental powers which seems like the work of a brisker and less complex van Vogt.*

The Communicators

by EDWARD S. AARONS

THE ANIMALS SCREAMED. THEY moved through his mind like stealthy beasts in a green, humid jungle, making shadow patterns across the web of his thoughts.

Everything was ready. He had done all that any man could do. It was up to the others now, those carefully chosen few who were at their stations, ready for the coup that would topple Protector Jasper and all the Communicators and make the nation free again. The briefing was over. The men were dispersed to their positions, ready to attack. In one hour, Texas would be free again, a sovereign nation truly, exactly one hundred years to the day since the Ten Day War.

Hennery Davis moved through the crowded, sunlit streets and went into the lobby of the Regents Building. His offices, as Deputy Protector under Jasper, were combined with his living quarters. Manda was here, watching the screens. Hennery stopped and looked at her. The wild beasts prowled in the back of his head.

"Manda?" he said.

"I am here, Hennery."

"Are they still blipping?"

"Yes, Hennery."

"How much more time?"

"Fifty-two minutes."

"Good," Hennery said. "Very good. Are you nervous?"

"No."

"Do you trust me?"

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"Yes, Hennery."

"What about this Charles Mugrath?"

"He's still waiting."

"I see." Hennery listened to the screams. "Let him wait."

"But he is impatient, Hennery."

"I don't care."

"You can't keep a Communicator man—"

Hennery's voice cracked with a high, ravening anger. "He's not a Communicator. He's just their man, another blip, for all I can see. I'm not afraid of him."

"But I am," Manda said.

She continued to watch the vision screen. It was a typical morning production, an endless and dreary agony of domestic tragedy that kept women glued to its infinite and infinitesimal crises. The screen filled half the wall in the office. On a big plasti-table at Manda's hand was a conglomeration of hastily constructed electronic devices hooked in relays to the state-owned vision screen. The engineer who had built the device was dead now. Hennery had seen to that. It had been a great day when he, Deputy Protector of Texas, had discovered the secret of the Communicators. He alone, of all the teeming millions who watched the screens, knew the true meaning behind the pap.

He looked at Manda again.

"Are you really afraid of Mugrath?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Mugrath is nothing, nothing; only a hired hand," he said impatiently.

"Then why is he here, today, at this hour?"

"Coincidence," he said.

She frowned delicately. "Please, Hennery."

He said sharply: "Don't anger me, Manda."

"I try not to. Have you talked to Dr. Soong this morning?"

"An idiot, like the rest of them. I don't have to delve into my psyche every morning. It is weak, introverted—all this concern about self is nonsense. We Texans don't need that sort of thing."

"Dr. Soong is concerned about you today."

"Our plan will succeed. Today we shall be free. Now shut up, damn you!"

His voice had lifted to a scream. The beasts howled in the darkness that gathered behind his eyes. He turned away from Manda's pale stare so she couldn't see the faces of the animals through his own. He shivered with excitement, and he was aware of the rapid increase of his pulse and blood pressure, of the white-hot state of his nerves. Manda's image persisted in the back of his eyes. He drove it away. She came back again. He couldn't see the vision screen or the masked faces of the stereotyped domestic emotion plodding through a soporific

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script, while unctuous voices dripped from the invisible speaker in the wall. Opiates, he thought, palliatives, undermining the good native strength and judgment of the people. Austerity, that was a joke. Look at Manda. He saw her again, moving in her stiff, exaggerated costume through the jungle of his mind. Her green-tinted hair floated in the steamy atmosphere with a life all its own. Her yellow eyes were glowing and feral and frightened.

His woman, of course. Beautiful, beautiful. Green hair and tawny eyes and the long, long lashes artfully fanned over curved damask cheeks. She wore the stiff brocaded ceremonial morning gown. Imported, of course. Another sign of creeping Eastern decadence. Women couldn't resist it, not even here in Texas.

Manda — adept, professional, mistress of her art. Clever female devil. Made herself indispensable. Was it love? No such thing, Dr. Soong said. Answered physical needs, purely and simply. Only it wasn't pure or simple with Manda. She was as complex as the threaded gold embroidery on her classic ceremonial gown. Like the *jilk* drink, you couldn't stop with her; you always wanted more and more. And she could always devise more to give. Like last night . . .

Lewd, variant images of Manda as she had been last night moved like snakes through Hennery's mind.

Stop it, stop it!

He looked at the wall screen and then at the miniature bugging device that reproduced it on the table. For a moment the actors moved at normal speeds and ordinary gestures both on the wall-screen and the monitor. Then there was a click, and all at once on the table screen the actors seemed frozen in tableau unless you stared very closely and saw the slow drift of a hand, the changed expression of painted lips shaping a word. And in the next split second the slowed-down images on the monitor screen suddenly blacked out. A message appeared in bold red letters against a white background:

CITIZENS OF TEXAS!
The Communicators Are
Your Friends!
Obey the Austerity Program!
BE STRONG!
BE DISCIPLINED!
WORK and OBEY!

There was a click and the message was gone. All at once the actors reappeared on the table screen, coinciding with the drama enacted on the wall, which had gone on with no visible interruption. What was it that engineer had said? He had called it subliminal broadcasting. Messages flashed at the speed of microseconds, so fast that the conscious eye and mind could not perceive

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them. The viewer saw, yet did not see; the viewer knew nothing of this steady, monotonous invasion of his subconscious senses.

Long ago, before the Ten Day War, when free enterprise was the rule, various commercial organizations had experimented with subliminal broadcasting for merchandising impact. It hadn't worked very well then, because the TV tubes of those days scanned an image in more time than a subliminal message should take. But with the development of tubes capable of almost instantaneous scanning, subliminals became practicable after the initial failures.

The Communicators had learned how, Hennery thought bitterly. They knew well enough how to keep the people enslaved, victims of a relentless, silent and unseen propaganda that had its effect like the slow accumulation of grain upon grain of sand, until a mountain of popular ideology was built up.

Hennery gazed at the monitoring device that had unlocked the secret of the Communicators. Its operation was amazingly simple. It carried the regular video program at the normal rate. But when a blip appeared, it triggered the slow-down and the monitor held the subliminal message for a perceptible fraction of a second. Then it clicked off and picked up the regular program again.

The people knew nothing about the subliminals.

Nobody suspected.

It was hideous, cruel, vicious. It made a mockery of man. It fashioned puppets out of the millions who lived and worked and obeyed in reply to the tug of invisible strings.

Well, it would end today.

When Protector Jasper was killed.

When he, Hennery, ruled Texas.

He moved away from the screens, leaving Manda to monitor them. Impatience roweled him. Time moved too slowly. The troops which, as Deputy Protector, had been given into his hands to command would be encircling the Tower now, each man with his specific orders according to the timetable and detailed schedule. Soon there would be no more blipping. Then Texans would be able to think for themselves. Perhaps the other Confederations, too, since the Communicators were a loose network binding the various national entities of the continent together. But Hennery hadn't yet decided to make public the great secret he had discovered. Still, a new day and a new world would open up in a short hour. A safe, free world, ruled by Hennery Davis.

Down with the Communicators! Down with Protector Jasper! Up, up with Freedom!

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Hennery shivered and shook and waited.

Mugrath waited, too, but with quiet patience. He sat at a priceless teakwood lute table, a genuine import from China, and allowed the blank-faced girl at the reception desk to study him. The girl's eyes had undergone artful surgery to fold under the upper lid and give just a faintly Oriental touch to her face. The freckles under her tan showed her to be only too basically American. Not Texan, Mugrath thought, not Carolinian, or Plains, or Pacific. Just American. That's what they all were. That's what they all had to be. Or else all was lost.

Mugrath sat at ease, an austere and ominous figure of black stone, unornamented, with a craggy face as hard as the White Mountains of New Hampshire, seeming carved into eternal immobility. His dark, thick hair looked shaggy in contrast to the exotic styles of the clerical people moving nervously around him through the Deputy Protector's outer offices. He was aware of their sidelong, apprehensive glances—a stranger, an alien in their midst! He knew they were calling him *damyankee*, without much knowledge of the ancient derivation of the term. His gloomy black clothing troubled them. His very presence here, he knew, struck them as a visit from a dark bird of ill omen. He was a North Unionist, a Federalist, a Communicator. Enough to put anyone at unease.

Mugrath opened his mind a little and felt the periphery of apprehension around him in the busy office. There was a quality to the tension that he did not quite understand. Somewhere he seemed to hear a beast howling.

He probed further, curious about this. He did not like the probing. It still felt unnatural to him. Like the fine mesh of protective alloy grafted under his skin, there were also alterations made in the neural centers of his brain, a reorganization of key synapses executed under Surgeon Meeker's scalpel. The process had not been easy. It was granted only to a few—to security men of the North Union, perhaps half a dozen in all. Mugrath had been in the hospital centers for over a year, undergoing the transformation. Surgery had come a long way in the past century. But sometimes Mugrath wondered, with dim uneasiness, if more had been done to him that he did not know about. He had never been a rabid Conformist. Quite the contrary. Even when he first chose security work as his vocation, his psyche tests had almost washed him out as an undesirable individualist. He did not feel that way too often now. But he had made his choice, and his work for the rest of his life lay in clear, open

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channels before him. He was no longer like other men.

He heard the beast scream again, distantly.

Mugrath stood up with a quiet movement. His stir caused a mental ripple in the crowded office, like the waves of a pebble dropped into a pond. Thoughts went out, colliding, rebounding, questioning. He ignored them. A closed door of carved, genuine wood was behind the secretary, and Mugrath strode that way, tall and dark. The girl put out a tentative, fearful hand.

"I am sorry, but the Protector—"

"Who is Dr. Soong?" he asked sharply.

Her hand faltered in midair. "The psychiatrist?"

"Yes. How long has he been here?"

Oh, Lordie, I'm scared, I don't know what— "I couldn't say, sir."

She didn't know. Mugrath pushed open the carved door. He knew she had pressed an alarm buzzer on her desk. It didn't matter. He saw an anteroom, a clerical figure standing up, brain issuing shouts of alarm. A uniformed man entered the anteroom by an opposite door, a lip gun, so named by the shape of its radiant muzzle, in his hand. Mugrath moved faster than most humans would have believed possible. He swung once, and the colonel went down. The clerk screamed. Mugrath stepped over the colonel and ran down the corridor beyond. Once past the façade of elegance in the outer offices, he found only gray decay. Barren concrete walls, cracked and stained and seamed, and an unornamented stairway that spiraled up to the Deputy Protector's tower. His racing footsteps echoed hollowly on the steel treads. He flew upward as if drawn by a magnet toward the brain he had detected up here somewhere. Not far off, now. At the top of the steps he paused, where a window on a landing gave him a glimpse of the outer world and the city of Dallas. The sky was blue, with only a few fleecy morning clouds. A bright sun shone with welcome heat upon the plains beyond the city towers.

Mugrath probed.

Nothing.

He probed farther.

Still nothing.

This had never happened before. He took in all the bubbling babble of minds within five hundred feet of his position, but the mind he had first sought was gone.

Quickly he sorted out the possibilities. His quarry could just have been killed. Or it could have left the building. Or it could have felt his probe and closed its mind —something he himself could not do.

Alarm rang in him. He dis-

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carded the first possibility. And the sky was clear outside, with no copters visible. The second possibility, therefore, was out. The third remained. The most terrifying, perhaps, although Mugrath did not know terror any more.

There was a door off the landing that he suspected led to the penthouse offices and living quarters of the Deputy Protector. He opened the door and walked through.

No warning touched him.

Hands seized him, tightening on the muscular flesh under his black clothing. He did not see the face. He probed frantically into a gray, gelatinous mass of sardonic laughter. Something struck his head. He was propelled back to the landing, incredibly seized and lifted bodily into the air. For an instant he could look down into the drab concrete stairwell to the bottom, many floors below.

And then he was dropped.

And he plummeted toward the concrete floor far down there.

Hennery's room off the vision-center was circular, with striated walls where the arcs of windows overlooked the city complex. The day was calm and clear. The clouds drifted eastward from over the horizon, where the ghostly ruins of exhausted oilfields lifted twisty skeletal fingers into the blue. The city itself was tight and compact. Like the icebergs of the polar region, only a small portion of it presented itself above the surface, and there was far more of it floating below the earth.

Hennery stared up into the sky, making a supreme effort to control his pulse, his respiration, his sweat glands. Forty-six minutes to go.

Hennery was a tall man with a hard and heavy face, a jutting nose and a harsh mouth. His chin betrayed him, but he covered that with a small forked beard dyed bronze to match the fashionable wig. And although he silently berated Manda for her ornate Eastern costume, his own knee-length coat was heavily embroidered with African motifs, and his tight breeches, exhibiting powerfully muscled legs, shone with real natural silk. Imported, of course. Texas was a have-not republic, perhaps worse off than the other American Confederations since the oilwells went dry forty years ago. Decent and civilized items were hard to come by. Poverty rode the populace, radiation disease still took its toll, and the days of glory were idle dreams of dust.

Hennery shivered and sweated. He could see the tower of the Communicators in the center of the city, not far from this aerie of his. It glittered in splendor against the cheap plastics and synthetics of the rest of the city. Symbol of

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the loosely knit family of confederations, which Texas had reluctantly joined at the turn of the century, picking itself up out of the debris and near-barbarism of the war. Symbol of unique authority, of the domination of the word, of tyranny over men's minds the like of which humanity had never seen before.

North America was a continental island, a backward and isolated enclave in a world that ignored it and went forward on its own paths to the future.

Hennery hated the very shape and size of the Communicator tower. He felt as if his hatred would shake him apart, here and now.

Manda had left him to go back to the monitoring viewers. He sat down in a contour chair and delved in his embroidered coat for his *muhl* cigarettes. Not many left, he remembered. He would have to see Rezlov, the attaché clerk who worked the black market, about more of these foreign cigarettes. Texas tobacco was fair enough as a base, but you had to have *muhl*, grown on the hydroponic farms outside Shanghai, to get a decent and safe smoke. Everything in short supply. It had been so ever since Hennery, a man of forty-two, could remember.

The Communicator Tower looked calm and serene in the sparkling sunlight. Safe enough, and no sign of activity there yet. But that was to be expected. The attack was scheduled to come swiftly, with no warning. First Protector Jasper was to be assassinated on his way to his office. Then those guards who proved loyal in the crisis to the old regime. Then the Communicators, those damyankee representatives of the North Union. After that, the phone would ring and Hennery, Deputy Protector, would take command.

Hennery looked at his watch, tugged at his forked beard, cursed savagely. Thirty-six minutes to go. He had to relax. He felt as if he were flying apart in every direction.

"Dr. Soong!" he shouted.

His voice went screaming off in garbled echoes. He turned, panting, away from the window. He stared at the door where Manda had gone. Her face appeared briefly, white and frightened and distorted under her cosmetics.

"I sent for him, Hennery."

He stared at her, dazed. "Are they still blipping?"

"Yes."

"Anything new?"

"It's the same stuff."

"Good," he breathed. "There has been no betrayal."

"Hennery, it will work out. All your plans. We will win." She came to him and touched him, smiling professionally. He threw her hand off.

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"Get away from me, damn you!" he shouted. "I want Dr. Soong!"

"I am here," said the Chinese.

Soong appeared behind Manda, tall and serene, smiling gently, his eyes artful, representative of what had become the greatest dominant nation on earth. Impossible to guess the man's age under the veneer of cultivated mannerisms. Impossible to guess the vast storehouse of knowledge and technic in his cranium, the accumulation of a hundred years of explosive, leaping advances while America stood still in Pyrrhic victory, in isolation, in quarantine since the mistakes of the Ten Day War of the Sixties in the last century.

"You must relax, Deputy Protector, to be in a proper frame of mind to meet your people soon," Soong said quietly. "All your plans will come to fruition presently, as I have promised you."

Goddam spy, Hennery raged silently. He did not miss the faint shadow that crossed Soong's dark eyes as he thought this. But he dismissed it as a coincidence. Spy and sneak, he thought; but we can't live decently without them. No good doctors in Texas. Not for decades. Got to import medics. Soong was smart. He even drawled like the locals when he chose to. Now was not the time he chose, however.

"I believe you would like some *knif?*" the Chinese said.

"I'm all right," Hennery raged. "You'd like to put me under right now, wouldn't you?"

"If not the *knif,* then relax and appreciate my poor gift to you," Soong said. "Does it not always succeed in calming you?"

"Yes," Hennery gasped. "Yes, turn it on."

Manda vanished.

He sat down and faced the plastic wall.

Sound came from the wall as it dissolved. It became the sea, a crested wave, foaming and seething, with blue-greens and tints of lavender, moving, restless, yet strangely obsessive and quieting. A work of art. The only one of its kind in the Republic. For all he knew, the only one in all the Confederations. The mobile painting was Hennery's secret pride and joy.

He listened to the hiss and sigh and long-drawn thunder of breaking waves. Hennery had never actually seen the ocean. He stared hard at all that water. In a way, it was like the plains of home. But this was a different element, this stuff that lifted and fell and seethed and roared. Amazing, he thought. A painting that lived, that moved in three dimensions. And best of all, no wires connected to it like all the visiscreens piped from the Communicator Tower. No blipping here. No silent, secret conditioning of mind and thought and body. No

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den directions to enslave a man. Just the sea, soothing, restful, as far as the eye could reach. He could even smell the sharp tang of ozone and feel the cool, salty wind against his perspiring face.

Manda came in again.

He stared and shivered. . . .

"Hennery," she said. "Mugrath insists."

"Who?"

"Mugrath. The Communicator man."

"He's still here?"

"He insists he must see you. No. No more delay."

Hennery looked around for Dr. Soong. The Chinese was gone. He got up and switched off the painting. It was hard to come back to reality. To return to this barren room, with its pompous pretense of wealth in the midst of starvation. He shook himself mentally. Far back in the darkness of his mind, a beast howled, dimly ululating against the jungle of his thoughts. He drew a deep breath of resolve.

"Send Mugrath in, Manda."

She was shocked. "Now? There are only a few minutes—"

"Send him in. I can handle him."

"Mugrath? You?"

"Trust me."

"It can be dangerous, Hennery." Then she shrugged. "But he will not wait, anyway."

The wall was dead, smooth striated plastic again. He regretted the sea, the wind and waves, the smell and the sounds of it. But he felt better now. Success was at hand.

Mugrath knew he had been lucky. The powers that a year of intricate surgery had given him were still comparatively new and untried. Falling, he had instinctively snatched at anything that came to hand. Whoever had pushed him down the stairwell hadn't waited to see the results. When Mugrath caught at a railing and felt the snap and pull of the alloy mesh grafted under his skin, no one saw him. Which was just as well. For a moment he hung there by one hand, turning dizzily over the long drop below. Then he pulled himself up, got a grip with his left hand, and fell over the railing to the step beyond. He did not waste time congratulating himself. He went straight back up to the anteroom, probing for any sign of surprise among the clerks who regarded him there. He insisted on an immediate appointment with the Deputy Protector. And somewhat to *his* surprise, it was promptly granted.

He knew at once, from the clamoring he perceived in the room, that this was Deputy Protector Hennery Davis. He knew, too, all about the impending revolt and attack on the Communicator Tower. Mugrath's gaunt,

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youthful face revealed none of his knowledge, however. He glanced at Manda, in her ornately brocaded coat, and probed briefly, then again. He sensed a parallel here to the alarm that had driven him up the stairwell to the attack on him. But there were clouds and mists in the way, and his austere mind recoiled from the carnality of the woman's thoughts.

"Mugrath," Hennery said, "you honor me."

Mugrath bowed in stiff ceremony. "I do not presume to intrude upon the heavy schedule of duties that are yours, Deputy Protector. But I was sent here on a matter of some urgency to the Confederation."

"From where?"

"Boston," Mugrath said.

"I am honored. Manda, will you bring Mr. Mugrath—"

"I wish no refreshments, sir."

"But you have had a long and tiresome journey—"

"And I have come straight to you," Mugrath said.

Hennery looked at him. "Oh?"

"Not to the Protector himself."

"I see."

"Or to the local Communicators."

Hennery's beard trembled. "How much do you know?"

"Everything," Mugrath said.

Hennery walked around to his desk. He reached into a topmost drawer and took out a lip gun and shot at Mugrath. The radiant discharges made violent coruscati in the room. Hennery's face became congested with rage. Mugrath still stood there. He seemed unharmed.

"Your gun isn't working," he said quietly. "Put it down, Protector."

Hennery leaned forward, panting. He put his weight on the desk and then straightened, leveled the weapon again, and squeezed the trigger a second time. More violent lightning slashed across the intervening space. Manda screamed, went silent, screamed again.

Mugrath said: "You cannot kill me, Protector."

Hennery sank down heavily in his chair. His face looked ashen. He threw the lip gun away. Manda shrank back against the wall behind him. The mask of her cosmetics had cracked under the pressure of her terror.

"We will talk," Mugrath said. "We still have a few minutes."

"You said you know about my plan for today?" Hennery whispered.

"I know all about it."

"Am I under arrest?"

"You may proceed as planned."

"I don't understand," Hennery muttered. "Your own people will be killed."

Mugrath was silent. He didn't understand it, either. For a moment, dark confusion moved in him. He wondered what he was

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doing. He wondered if there had been a mistake in his orders. There was something here, a treachery that he would not have condoned a year ago. Why should it trouble him? He was not that Mugrath of a year ago. The surgeon's scalpel had seen to that. He pushed down his confusion.

"I know that. My orders are to permit you to succeed."

"Is it a trick?" Hennery whispered.

"No trick." Mugrath stood easily again, tall and dark, a somber figure with his craggy, oddly youthful face. He sensed no guilt in Hennery's seething mind—none, at least, for the attempt at murder so recently directed at him. Hennery's brain was too full of screaming noises to probe much farther. "How did you learn about the subliminal broadcasting?" Mugrath asked softly.

Hennery tugged at his forked beard. "An engineer—a man named Griegson — electronics expert. He discovered it. He worked for me."

"And where is Griegson now?"

"He—he's dead."

"Killed?"

"He—he had an accident."

Lie, Mugrath perceived. It did not matter. He sensed the rush of anger and outrage in Hennery, a strengthening of resolve now that first fears gave ground before renewed confidence.

"Dirty, vicious system you people have," Hennery said thickly. "Making slaves out of all of us. How long has it been going on?"

"Many years," Mugrath said calmly.

"But why?" Hennery pounded his desk. "Why do you do it?"

"You need a lesson in history," Mugrath said. "Our mistakes were made in the Ten Day War. We've been trying to recover ever since."

"But—we *won* the war!" Hennery snarled.

"Did we?"

"Everybody knows—"

"Everybody knows the missiles came down on us, too. We lost forty million people, a dozen of our major cities, and the confidence of the world. We were not defeated. No. But we didn't win, either."

"We are still free—except for the Communicators—"

"The Communicators tied the country together again—a patchwork job, as yet, with the various confederations still exercising autonomy. What used to be called a hundred years ago—Madison Avenue, I think the generic term was—re-established communications. We pulled ourselves out of threatened barbarism. The rest of the world had the same problem, true. But we had built up a balance of mistrust, you know, especially in the East, among newly free colonial peoples. The mistrust was reciprocated. And we were gradually isolated. We liked

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it that way, unfortunately, in the decades after the war. By the time we woke up to look at the world again, the seas of space belonged to others. We were outcast from global humanity. Sidetracked, simply left to wither on the vine. And our natural riches were gone."

"I know all this," Hennery muttered.

"And you still think we won? When you know, too, how the Chinese people expanded, finally dominating those who had wakened them from their centuries of sleep? We are in the minority now. *We* are the backward peoples. It is only the Communicators who preserve a sense of union among the different confederations. The Communicators must resort to secret propagandizing even now, because of the interstate warfare of the early decades of this century — what you are pleased to call 'the Second War Between The States.' Hatred still remains. To you, I'm a damyankee, without your figuring the reason why you call me that."

"You're a Communicator man," Hennery whispered. "I shot at you. Why couldn't I kill you?"

Mugrath had caught a thin thread of pale thought with his mention of the Chinese. "Where is Dr. Soong?"

"My psychiatrist? Somewhere around," Hennery said impatiently. "He is of no matter."

"How long has he been with you?"

"A year." Hennery's thoughts moved on another tangent. He said: "You will not stop me. But I warn you—there will be no more bipping."

"All right," Mugrath said easily.

Hennery registered astonishment. "You agree?"

"I agree," Mugrath said. He probed, caught the thought that wondered what unknown strength was making the Communicators afraid of Hennery. Mugrath smiled inwardly. "I have my orders, you see, not to interfere. I am to establish liaison with you, when your revolt is successful. It is for the sake of our future Union."

"Hennery," Manda said suddenly.

They had forgotten the woman. She stood at the window, facing the city. "It begins," she said.

A dull explosive rumbling rolled over the city with her words. Hennery lunged to the window to watch. Mugrath stood where he was. He knew the course of events that would take place here today. The computers, back at Boston headquarters, had predicted everything. There was no reason to doubt their accuracy. Jasper was old, disease-ridden, senile, corrupt. He would die today. Hennery would be the new Protector of Texas. And Hennery was partly mad, ignorant, seized

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with ambition, hungry for power. Where was the balance, where was the sense of this exchange? Mugrath felt a stab of pain in his mind with the thought. He knew a barrier had been placed there by the surgeon's scalpel. He was not to ponder the political implications of anything he was ordered to do. Not to reason the *why* of anything. He looked at Hennery and felt a desperate moment's confusion. He had his orders. The simple thing to do was just to carry them out. To find Soong and find what Soong had done to Hennery. And then kill the Chinese and report back to headquarters. Simple. Q.E.D. Mission accomplished.

A dark, greasy pall of smoke billowed up into the blue Texas sky over the Communicator Tower. Distantly and indistinctly came the muffled popping of guns. A copter landed on the Communicator roof. Another. Military vehicles. A huge land-tank rumbled up out of a gaping dark hole in the street, a hole that appeared suddenly, like the open maw of some underground beast. The tank was being fired upon by the defenders. A bomb burst, shattered a huge corner of the building, and masonry and steel went sliding in a dusty cloud to the street. A number of people on the sidewalks, caught by surprise, were buried and killed under the fall. The tank swiveled ponderously, and its stubby cannon came up and fired. More masonry fell. The bodies of men flew like specks of dust into the blue and evaporated.

Mugrath turned away, looking for Manda. She was gone. Hennery stood hypnotized by the spectacle he had created. Mugrath went after the girl.

She was just leaving the outer room where the monitoring vision screen sat on its table. She turned and saw him. She ran. Mugrath ran after her.

"Manda!"

She vanished around a corner of the corridor. Mugrath halted. He was in an octagonal foyer. Eight doors stood closed against him. But he felt drowned in the wake of terrorized thought Manda had strewn behind her. The terror crashed and battered against his perceptions. As if to parallel his probing sensitivity, he caught the scent of ozone, the lift and fall of a vast, swelling sea. Where? What? How could it be? The scene was clear. He knew the ocean, he was a New Englander. Not the Atlantic, this sea. A serene rising and falling, a hypnotic, somnolent, lazy and tropical sea, this. One wanted to walk in and float away, easily and gracefully, into . . . what? Oblivion!

He chose a door on his left. Manda stood behind it. She cowered away against the wall in the windowless room. In here, the

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sound of the palace coup taking place across the city was muffled, almost indistinguishable. He ignored Manda, in her crumpled brocaded morning gown, with her green hair. He looked at Dr. Soong, seated at a free-form desk on which a small jade Buddha gave off delicate incense.

"You are a remarkable man, Mugrath," Soong said gently. "How were you made?"

Mugrath issued a lashing probe, came up against nothing at all. Soong smiled. Mugrath did not try again.

"A man of wisdom as well as of artificial talents," Soong said.

"You have the same gift as mine," Mugrath said.

"Precisely."

"And the girl?"

"Nothing at all. Ignore her, please."

"She yammers too much."

"It is not within Manda to control herself. She is of no consequence." Soong sat as immobile as the jade image before him. "You agree that Hennery will be the new Protector. But I sense a conflict here. You Communicators will not give up lightly the control you have over the population. Why did you agree? You will not control Hennery."

"But will you?"

"I do. I can. I will."

"How?"

"That must remain my humble little stratagem."

"I can kill you," Mugrath said.

"Can you? Try."

Mugrath made no effort. "Then where are we?"

"A standoff. We must compromise."

"What do you want?"

"Very little. Only Hennery, as Protector of Texas."

"But your people have ignored us for almost a century. Why do you come here now? What do you want? We have nothing to offer. You have cut us off from the mainstream of humanity."

"Perhaps we wish to invite you back with us again."

"You lie."

Soong shrugged.

"Why?" Mugrath asked again. "Has the time come to finish what was begun a hundred years ago? Not with atomic bombs this time, but with subversion and slow decay? Hasn't the rot we have lived with been enough? Is it too slow for you? Or are you learning that we have conquered our rot, that in our poverty and weakness we are finding a new strength?" Mugrath paused.

"Go on," Soong said quietly.

"We are rediscovering the principles that gave a glory to Western civilization. Freedom of man, freedom of the individual, dignity, and the right to walk in the sunlight—"

"Do *you* do that?" Soong stabbed suddenly.

Mugrath opened his mouth,

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shut it, fought confusion within.

"What else did they do to you, Mugrath?" Soong asked.

"I have been equipped for my job."

"You are an automaton. Unthinking, except to perform the duties you were designed to execute."

Something shrieked a vehement denial in Mugrath's mind. Something urged him to listen no more. Something suddenly wept.

His reaction was beyond control. He attacked.

He did not have to move. This was a mental weapon he had not used before—had, in fact, been warned, by the surgeons at the medical center not to use except in extreme emergency. From his mind issued a blast of kinetic force that leaped invisibly toward the seated Chinese, focusing on the man's throat, on neural centers in the delicate juncture of spine and medulla oblongata. Mugrath felt an immediate reaction within himself. A weakening, a swift draining of vital life force that slowed his heart and brought a cold dew of ghastly perspiration to his craggy face.

Nothing happened.

Gasping, Mugrath fell to his knees. He did not relent. He felt his heart stop, skip, stop again, then race with erratic, feeble pulsations. His hands and feet went cold.

Dr. Soong sat unmoved behind his desk. Dimly, through darkening mists, Mugrath perceived the shrill yammering of Manda's alarm, somewhere behind him. A vast pressure grew in his mind, threatening to burst the knitted sutures of his skull. Darkness thundered. He summoned the last of his strength.

A thin snapping sound was heard in the room.

Soong's face changed.

Under the parchment of his yellow skin, the bone yielded to irresistible kinetic pressure, dissolving, parting, melting into fluid dissolution. Surprise shone briefly in the other's black, wide eyes. Shock and disappointment yielded to a moment of ultimate terror. Then Soong's head suddenly jerked back, and back again, as if some giant hand bent it over the carved edge of his chair. A thin whistling came from his collapsing lungs, and through the gray mists of Mugrath's mind pierced one shrill mental scream of anguish.

Then Dr. Soong was dead.

Mugrath remained on hands and knees, panting. He shivered in the cold sweat that bathed him. He listened to the last dying echoes in Soong's mind. *Satisfaction?* He glimpsed a fading image of a placid ocean, blue-green and lavender under a warm and benign sun. *Triumph?* The image was gone almost before he grasped it.

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Mugrath stood up. Manda stood where she had been, cowering, her hand at her throat above the stiff upstanding collar of her ornate gown. She stared at Soong's body, and then at Mugrath.

"Don't go," Mugrath whispered.

She looked at him. "He's dead?"

"Yes."

"How did—you do it?"

"Take me to the ocean," he said.

"Ocean?"

"Hurry!"

He probed. He felt curiously weak. His perception failed. He tried again. There was no strength left in him. The woman stared, her mind a vortex in which all useful thought was drowned. Mugrath lifted himself to his feet. He leaned against the desk. His slight movement made Dr. Soong's body topple sidewise to the floor. He paid no attention.

"Manda, think! What is all this about an ocean? Think!"

"Dr. Soong's gift—"

And then he had it.

He turned and left her. In the octagonal foyer beyond Soong's office, he could hear the exultant shouts of victory dimly echoing through the building. The revolt was successful. Protector Jasper, sovereign ruler of the Texas Confederation, was dead. Long live the new Protector, Hennery! A new day had dawned.

Mugrath swallowed acrid distaste in the back of his throat. A trembling of weakness still persisted all through his body as he made his way back to Hennery's suite.

No one was in the room where the monitoring system on the Communicator screens had been installed. Through the plastic walls came a hubbub of shouting men, yelling congratulations. Hennery was in there, tugging at his forked beard, smiling with his eyes while his mouth hardened and his strong nose turned to this one and that, marking this man for promotion, this man for death.

Mugrath leaned against the wall in the silent room adjacent to Hennery's aerie. He wiped sweat from his face. He felt a squirm of nausea. He told himself he was too weak to go on. But through those months in the hospital, those long black hours on the surgeon's table, an unbreakable chain of command had been forged in him, too strong to break, too deeply built into the fiber of Charles Mugrath for Mugrath to protest. Soong had been right. He was an automaton. He obeyed orders, nothing more. He was not a thinking man any more.

The automatic relays in his mind clicked and protested. *You are doing what is right! You have your orders. Obey!*

His hands fumbled against the striated wall. He found the cleverly concealed lock, a tiny projection of design, and turned it,

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opened it. The wall slid silently aside, exposing the mechanism of Dr. Soong's three-dimensional painting of the China Sea. Mugrath studied the complex electronic components that operated the stereoscopic panels. In one section a small tape-recorder control had been installed. He tore out the tape, took it back to the table where the monitoring mechanism had been attached to the regular state vision screen. He installed it here and turned on the small screen that Manda had been using to monitor the regular broadcasts.

The sea appeared, the wave frozen in slow motion, in subliminal action. And then the message, hidden, unsuspected, like a viper secluded in a garden, from Dr. Soong to Protector Hennery.

Mugrath laughed and sat down. The watcher watched, the trapper trapped, the hunter turned hunted!

Hennery, by his discovery of the subliminal propaganda issued by the Communicators, had been moved to rebel against this secret indignity. Had been moved to blood, and to violence. Had risked all, even life itself, just to be free of the insidious campaign to unite all the American confederations. Hennery had wanted, in his own way, to walk in freedom, the sole possessor of his mind and thoughts.

And Dr. Soong, with his marvelous gift, had installed in this painting precisely the thing that Hennery had rebelled against. One web destroyed, the new Protector, all unwitting, had been woven into the meshes of another. And this one under the control of Dr. Soong.

With an angry gesture, Mugrath swept the tape from the machine, tore it, tore it again, and dropped it into the wall receptacle that took waste down into the basement incinerators.

Soong was dead. His trap was destroyed. Hennery was free.

Mission accomplished.

But was it?

Throughout the city were the sounds of rejoicing. Mugrath went back to work. There was a supply of tape in this office Manda used. It was not difficult to analyze the punch mechanism. He sat back and thought for a few moments, sensing the strengthening recovery of his heart and body, a refreshment that made him feel stronger with each passing moment. Presently he began tapping out crisp, brief, repetitive messages on the tape. Nothing too overt, too strong. But hypnotic in their quality, quiet, and unassuming, not asking too much; stressing the importance of Union over Confederation, promising a resurgence of strength, a new place in the future of humanity if only sectional hatreds and suspi-

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cions could be put aside at last.

It did not take him long.

And in a few more moments, Mugrath had placed his subliminal tape within the mechanism of Dr. Soong's marvelous gift to the new Protector.

No need to test the three-dimensional painting. He knew it would operate and perform its function on the mind of the new Protector like the slow erosion of ceaseless drops of water on stone. Daily, Hennery would turn for solace to the calm and serenity of his prized possession. And daily, unknown to him, unsuspected, the messages of the Communicators would reach him.

It would take time.

But in the North Union, they would be ready for Hennery's overtures toward a closer union of the confederations.

Mugrath left the room. He saw that Manda stood proudly beside Hennery in the crowded office beyond, among the sycophants and office seekers kowtowing to the forked beard, the flashing eye, the imperial presence of the new ruler. He did not join them. His somber Puritan clothing was too conspicuous this day, when the blood of any Communicator man in Texas was a signal for rejoicing.

He returned to Soong's quarters. Dr. Soong's clothing fitted him well enough. In a few minutes, unnoticed and unmissed, he was on the roof, walking toward his copter parked among the many machines—most of them military—on the flight pad.

The sun was warm. The sky was clear and blue, peaceful, unblemished. Mugrath looked up. Beyond was the ocean of space, ruled by others just as long-dead England had once ruled the ocean seas of earth. And unseen but there, nevertheless, the forbidding sign: *No Americans allowed!*

Some day that would be changed.

Mugrath looked out over the city, at the charred and smoking ruins of the Communicator Tower. He should feel happy, contented with the accomplishment of his mission. Then whence came these vague and formless sadnesses, this stir of questioning, of right and wrong? He wondered why he wanted to weep.

Again he became aware of the inflexible net of forged obedience skilfully built into him by surgeons' scalpels. What difference did it make? But it made a difference. These strange storms, these stresses of pulling and pushing within him, as the man he once was still struggled feebly against the man he had become, were intolerable. He felt the burden of a great, overwhelming sorrow rise within him.

And Mugrath sat down and wept for himself and the world.

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Kit Reed, whose first published story, The Wait, *appeared here two months ago, knows St. Petersburg (her first job was on the* Times *there) and tells a story which could happen only in that Florida haven of senior citizens. Mrs. Reed follows in two respects the tradition of such F&SF discoveries as Mildred Clingerman, Philip K. Dick and Chad Oliver: Her second story was bought even before the first appeared in print (and more will be coming up soon); and the two stories have nothing in common save quality and individuality.*

Devotion

by KIT REED

HARRY FARMER LOVED HIS TEETH.

His love began when they first came in, strong and white, in the wake of his scraggly baby teeth. It grew each time a mother looked at his brilliant mouth and pushed her youngster, one of his playmates, to a round of milk or another session with the toothbrush. It came into full flower the year he bit one of his grade-school antagonists and became the hero of his class. It flourished in the years when women looked at him and said, "What a beautiful smile!" Now, in the winter of his life, it was at its strongest, for the teeth had remained faithful to him over the years.

Each morning he stood in front of the chromed mirror in the guest house and smiled a good morning to them. ("Happy day, beauties," he said.) They seemed to tingle under his triumphant tongue as he ran it around his mouth, greeting each tooth in its turn. When he brushed them, he could hardly wait to wash the foam away so he could look at them again and receive, in the mirror, a reassuring morning smile. He carried a small toothbrush on a clip like a pencil in his coat, and a small packet of dentifrice in his wallet. When he felt even the lightest film coming over them, he excused himself from the lunch table or the shuffleboard court or wherever he happened to be and went to have his moment alone with them, brushing them to a lustrous shine. ("Happy? Isn't that better?" they

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always twinkled back at him).

Mrs. Granstrom, who lived on the same floor of the guest house in St. Petersburg, always said Harry Farmer had come to Florida just because it was a better climate for his teeth. She told the world he gave them sunbaths, but he noticed she couldn't help looking at him admiringly when he was laughing at her taunts or biting into a succulent hard roll.

He twitted Mrs. Granstrom about her gold inlays and her back-molar bridge, and he smiled at her especially broadly on days when she had just come back from having the grips on her bridge filed down or her abscessed tooth drained again. He laughed off her attempts to ply him with candy; he knew she wanted to get at his teeth. On the one occasion when she aimed a ceramic palm tree at his mouth, he called her a vindictive old woman, but he was ready with his smile soon afterward and she seemed to cheer up under the gleam of his beautiful teeth.

She had to admit to herself, he was sure, that she was proud to go down to the shuffleboard club on his arm.

"How many other men are there here who are in their late sixties and still have all their own teeth?" he would ask. "Not a cavity, not a blemish," he'd go on, and before he'd gotten to the court where they were to play, he'd have opened his mouth for at least one awestruck newcomer.

"You old fool, you know you're seventy-two," Mrs. Granstrom would hiss (she'd never deny the part about the teeth).

"Ah, but this mouth of mine is in its twenties," he'd say.

Usually when he said that she'd pick up her stick and start battering her shuffleboard disc.

In Harry Farmer's seventy-second winter (his tenth in St. Petersburg), tragedy struck.

Mrs. Granstrom went down to the shuffleboard courts alone that day. She'd spent the earlier part of the morning chirping outside Harry's room, but she'd had no answer, even when she'd opened the door a crack and playfully thrown her green eyeshade in. Finally, when the sun had begun to get high and the hour had come when everybody would be on the courts, she had tramped down alone, in a fury, without her eyeshade or even a broad straw hat to protect herself from the sun.

She played several games with a new group of people before she spotted Harry, hustling down to meet her.

"Where've you been?" she crackled at him. "You know these people aren't our set at all, and I've had to spend the entire morning with them."

"Sorry, Martha," Harry mumbled, ducking his head.

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They played several more games before Mrs. Granstrom noticed that the once-proud Harry, who had bared his head and his smile to the sun for ten winters, was playing, head down, with her eyeshade on.

He hardly talked during lunch. He left the table several times, and when he came back he ducked his head and wouldn't smile.

They were on their way to the Roque Club when Mrs. Granstrom couldn't stand it any longer. He was dragging his feet on the pavement, head down, like a man with something to be ashamed of.

"Harry, what in hell's the matter with you?"

He looked up, frightened. "Not here!"

"Well then, where? Let's get on home so you can tell me about it."

"No, no. Not now. They'd suspect, if we didn't go along for roque and on down to the Pier for the covered dish supper. Not now."

"All right, Harry, not now, but I want to know what's troubling you before we get one day older."

"You will, Martha. You will." He hesitated. "You'll laugh."

Mrs. Granstrom found it hard to live through the rest of the day. Finally, after they'd dined on the Pier and walked once around Mirror Lake, they went back to the guest house. Most guests went to their rooms for a few minutes before they came downstairs to pass the rest of their evening in the rockers on the front porch, so it was a good time for them to slip inside Harry Farmer's room.

"Now, Harry. What in *hell's* the matter with you?"

He tiptoed to the windows and drew the shades. He opened his door once and peered out, quickly, into the hall. He drew her over into a corner and looked into her face. His eyes were haggard.

"They're loose!" he said sepulchrally. There was no need for him to explain.

Mrs. Granstrom, who was jealous of his teeth, almost told him she was glad, but she managed to keep quiet for a minute. Finally she spoke.

"Oh, Harry."

"It's true," he said brokenly. "How can I live through this?"

"Maybe there's nothing wrong." Jealousy or no, she hated to see him like this. "Maybe a quick visit to the dentist would straighten things out, Harry. They probably aren't loose at all. Just your nerves."

"Martha . . ." He paused and, painfully, came out with it. "I've been to the . . . *dentist.* I went up to Plant City last Wednesday—that time when I said I was playing golf in Tampa— and . . ." It was almost too much for him. "They're loose. Martha, what'll I do?"

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"You'll manage, Harry. They'll give you treatments that'll tighten them up in no time."

"Oh, Martha." He was a man tormented. "They're loose because I'm sick *and they'll all have to be pulled!*"

She was dumbfounded.

"Martha . . ." He was almost crying now. "Martha, I can't live without them."

"Harry, they'll give you a new pair so fine you'll be *glad* you lost the old ones."

"Martha, they're my teeth. I *love* them! I mean I can't live without them!" His lower lip was quivering.

"There, there, Harry. You won't have to do without them. You can use your false ones to eat with—any old fool can eat with his teeth, or smile with them, but how many men can have them all, perfect as the day they were minted, on his mantel for the rest of his life? Just think: no danger of chipping one in a fall or of breaking it by biting into a piece of glass or bone—no danger of cavities—you know, a man of your age just *might* get a cavity, if he were just the teeniest bit careless about what he fed his teeth, even once. . . ."

Harry brightened.

"What I mean, Harry, is that you can have them with you always, where you can see them without having to run to the mirror every time you want them." She looked at him craftily. "See, Harry?"

Harry sniffled a little, but his eyes were brighter.

"Tell you what, Harry: the day you get those teeeth pulled, I'll give you a velvet case"—she glanced up, and when she saw the tentative hope come into his eyes, she plunged on— "A velvet case with a glass top, so you can look in." She watched him carefully, and when she saw his teeth begin to glimmer in the beginning of a tentative smile, she surged in a crescendo. "Just think, Harry—you can see them, *roots and all!*" Mrs. Granstrom turned her eyes to the heavens and sighed. He'd shut up now.

"Oh, Martha." He smiled tremulously. "But—what can I say to the people down at the shuffleboard court? What would they do if they thought I'd lost my teeth? They'd *crucify* me, Martha!"

"Harry, don't you worry about a thing."

It was all done very discreetly. They told everybody he was going to visit his aunt in the country, so nobody was surprised when he left town right spang in the midst of the tourist season. They handled it carefully, so nobody at all had to know the terrible ordeal he was going through; nobody at all had to know his shame. When he came back, he

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looked the same as ever (a little paler, a little thinner, perhaps), except that he had a brand new set of teeth, made in the image of the others. Nobody ever knew his disgrace.

But from the day he got back, he changed. He kept more and more to his room, coming out later each morning, spending less time at the shuffleboard courts and the Roque Club.

"Poor thing," Mrs. Granstrom thought. "He must be having a terrible time getting used to his teeth."

He *was* having a terrible time getting used to his teeth. He never told Mrs. Granstrom about it, but once he spent a whole morning trying to put his old teeth, his first teeth, his *only* beloved teeth, into his mouth again. ("If things could only be the same between us," he mourned). When, defeated, he had gone back to the bedside table for his false teeth, he had had the devil's own time finding them. Finally he discovered them, hidden in the shag rug by his bed. They bit his toe.

Harry Farmer resented his false teeth, and he knew they resented him. In the first few nights they were together, he wasn't able to sleep for their clicking in his head. When he took them out, they rattled in the glass until all hours, until finally he had to put the glass itself under the bed where he couldn't hear them.

They pinched his raw, lonely gums unmercifully, and they made him gag every time he tried to brag about his true teeth. They tickled his mouth the first few times he tried to take nourishment. Once they bit his tongue.

Poor lonely, loving Harry Farmer kept his true teeth, his best-beloved teeth, in the jewel case Mrs. Granstrom had provided, on the table at the head of his bed. He reached out each night and opened the lid of the case, fondling each tooth in the dark. ("There, there, bicuspid—you're still with me. Now, molar . . .") By this time, he had begun taking his false teeth out each night. He carefully skirted the glass where they were kept in the little visits his hands made to the caseful of true teeth.

One of his worst trials came on the day when a newcomer to the shuffleboard courts, who had heard about Harry's wonderful teeth, asked him to open his mouth.

"You're mighty fresh," Harry bluffed.

"I think you're lyin' about them teeth. That's what I think," the newcomer said.

"Humph," Harry said. And he opened his mouth. Miraculously, the false teeth hugged his gums, looking enough like his own to satisfy the would-be sightseer.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled.

"What?" the stranger said.

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Harry's false teeth wiggled a little in his mouth, and snuggled closer to his gums.

Lonelier than usual that night, Harry reached out for the velvet case, hoping his teeth would comfort him in the dark. "Here's Harry, teeth. Did you miss me?" Something hard clamped down on his fingers. He yipped and jumped to turn on the lamp.

Looking pink and resentful in the light, his false teeth clung to his finger. He pried them off and puzzled over it until he went to sleep, positive he had put them in their glass before turning out the light.

The final indignity of the false teeth came the next night, when Harry reached out to give a farewell caress to his own, true teeth and found the false ones nestled next to them in the velvet box.

"This has to stop," he said, tapping the false teeth with his finger. "You have your nerve, climbing in there with my best teeth." He started to throw them in the far corner of the room, but he remembered his bare gums. "I might need you, in case there's a fire or something – nobody must ever see me without teeth." He put the velvet box with the true teeth out of harm's way, on the mantel. "Not for long, teeth. Good night."

Not having them next to him at night made a change in his life. The next day he met Mrs. Granstrom at the usual time on the front porch.

"I can't go with you at all today, Martha."

"Why in hell not?"

"I—I just can't, Martha."

"I bet it's those damn teeth of yours. Why can't you let them alone?"

He dropped his head and turned away. "I can't, that's all."

She looked after him. "Well," she thought philosophically. "Time heals all wounds. He'll get over it." She frowned ominously. "He'd better." She drew herself up furiously. "Those things have come between us long enough."

"I'm back—I'm here." Harry bounded to the mantel in his room and spent the morning stroking his teeth, talking to them. When the false teeth began to pinch his gums resentfully, he took them out and put them on the floor in the far corner, turned toward the wall. "Niiisshe, nishe. Hummn, humm," he said to the true teeth. When he gave them a regretful final pat and got ready to go to lunch, he found his false teeth on the shag rug by his bed. They had worked their way across the floor, heading toward him.

"Calm down," he told them curtly.

That afternoon Harry went to the Roque Club to meet Mrs. Granstrom, but he was so lonely the whole time for his teeth that

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he vowed he'd spend all day every day at home with them from then on.

From then on, he did. Mrs. Granstrom seethed. She took to asking him when he was going to come back to civilization, and hinting broadly about T-E-E-T-H around people who were liable to catch on to Harry's secret. Finally, in a fury because she'd found no suitable partner to replace Harry on the shuffleboard court, she threatened his teeth.

"I'm going to get those teeth, and I'm going to stop this foolishness," she said, heading toward the stair.

"Martha, you will not!" Furious, Harry was there before her. They exchanged heated words—she insulted his teeth and he passed some uncomplimentary remarks about her form on the shuffleboard court and the green eyeshade which she seemed more than passingly fond of.

"Harry, I'm warning you—and I'm warning those teeth!"

"You wouldn't dare," he said coldly, and he turned and went up the stairs.

The next day after breakfast Harry went back to his room to commune with his teeth. He liked that hour of the morning best because he knew there was no one in the guest house—and because he knew Mrs. Granstrom and her cruel thoughts were at the shuffleboard court several blocks away. He was turning over an incisor with his finger, admiring its smooth length, when he heard his door open.

"Well, of all the disgusting things." Mrs. Granstrom was enormous in the doorway. "I thought you worried up here, or took your false teeth out, or cried—but this is one of the most disgusting things . . ."

"I'll thank you to get out," Harry said haughtily, but the sounds he emitted were somewhat different. He would never forgive her for seeing him without his teeth.

Laughing evilly, Mrs. Granstrom backed toward the door. "Harry," she said, "those teeth ought to be done away with. Put in your false teeth and behave like a normal person."

"Go!" he stormed, and pointed toward the hallway.

She went.

Too disturbed to eat, Harry went to bed early, putting his false teeth in their glass by his bedside, saying a last goodnight to his true teeth, still in their velvet case on the mantel. Soothed by counting bicuspid, molar and incisor, running his mind over their shapes, he went to sleep.

"Yowl"

Harry was wakened by a scream and a crash. Frantic, he turned on the light.

One glance told the story.

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Mrs. Granstrom lay, felled, by the mantel, still groping out for the box which held Harry Farmer's true teeth, still clasping the hammer she had intended to use to demolish them. Still locked in her ankle, willing to do anything to gain favor with their master, even to protecting their rivals, were Harry Farmer's valiant little false teeth.

Withered by Harry Farmer's glance of loathing, Mrs. Granstrom heaved herself to her feet and lurched out of the room. The false teeth, badly injured by their fall, dropped from her leg as she passed the shag rug. She managed to grind one corner of them under her heel as she limped away.

Stunned, Harry sat down on the floor to think. For a mad moment, he thought of donning a mourning shroud made from his coverlet and taking to his bed for the rest of his life. His false teeth were shattered beyond repair and his true teeth—well, what had his true teeth done to protect themselves or him? Nothing. They'd forsaken him: they'd simply . . . dropped out after he'd given them a lifetime of love and care. There was nothing to live for.

Ah, but if he stayed in his room, somebody down at the shuffleboard court would be bound to hear about Harry's shame. That fresh fellow who hadn't believed his stories about his teeth would begin to talk, and then Mrs. Granstrom would . . .

Besides, a fellow had to eat. Perhaps he could sneak out at night, go to Plant City while it was still dark, get his false teeth replaced.

In the meantime . . .

He got up and walked to the door, where his badly wounded false teeth lay, spent after their act of bravery. He picked them up and stroked them, musing.

"You stood by me, even when you thought I could never . . . feel anything for you; and my tr— first teeth, those other teeth, deserted me to begin with. You deserve the best, old teeth. . . ."

Smiling, mumbling through his gums, he took the false teeth to the mantel, cupping them protectively in his hand. He opened the velvet case. With a gay, reckless wave of the hand, he swept his first teeth into the trash and deposited the valiant little false ones in their place.

FLASH!

Beginning in our August issue, Robert A. Heinlein's newest novel:

HAVE SPACESUIT — WILL TRAVEL

Don't miss it!

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When it comes to fresh variations on The Pact with the Devil, F&SF's authors seem to be inexhaustible. With all due respect to Isaac Asimov, Ted Cogswell, Miriam deFord, Art Porges and other notable variators, some sort of award should go to Rog Phillips for what seems to me the most unexpected variant yet.

Services, Incorporated

by ROG PHILLIPS

"THAT'S ALL RIGHT, JOE. I KNOW you would if you could. Thanks anyway." Bill Nealy, his handsome face etched with discouragement, started to turn away.

"Wait a minute, Bill," Joe said.

Bill turned back. Joe seemed to be hesitating about something. He studied Bill with his narrow-set eyes, his thin lips curved downward. Those eyes bothered Bill. They seemed to be small black peepholes to eternity. He had just met Joe a week ago and knew nothing about him, not even his last name. Hitting up practically a stranger for a loan was plain desperation.

"You're really in a spot?" Joe said. "I just happened to think of a possibility . . ."

"I'm at the point where I'll try anything," Bill Nealy said.

Joe seemed to come to a decision. "OK," he said. "You might be accepted. It's a thing called Services, Incorporated. Just a post office box. An easy number. Three sixes. Main Post Office. If they accept you they'll straighten out your finances, help you get a better job."

"Say!" Bill said. "That sounds all right! Thanks."

"Don't thank me," Joe murmured, his thin lips curving into a smile. "And don't say who sent you. If the man who contacts you wants to know, say you just heard about it in a conversation and don't remember who said it. OK?"

"Sure," Bill said. "I'll see you around. And if this works out I won't forget you, pal."

Bill Nealy pushed out of Mick Costino's cigar shop and went back to the office. Joe was a strange guy, he thought as he rode up in the crowded elevator. Hard to tell what nationality. If there was such a thing as an

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extraterrestial he would say Joe was one of those, but that was comic-strip junk. He liked the guy, in spite of his narrow-set eyes. He had wanted to tell Joe all his troubles and at the same time had a feeling Joe knew all about them.

In his cubbyhole office he dragged-out his typewriter and wrote:

Dear Sir:

I am desperately in need of financial assistance. A mutual friend suggested you to me. I can be reached during business hours at the offices of Adwrite in the 184 Wabash Building. My home phone is GL 7-5884.

It was only ten o'clock. Was there a chance he could get action right away? He hastily addressed the envelope, sealed the note in it, and walked over to the main post office. At the information window they agreed to put it in box 666 right away.

There was nothing to do now but wait. Back at the 184 building he delayed going upstairs, pushed into the greasy spoon instead for a sweet roll and coffee, and tried to prepare himself for failure. No one was going to go out of his way to help him. It would be like it had been with the bank and the loan company.

"Now, Mr. Nealy, you say your take-home pay is this and your bills are that, leaving this much for living expenses. You have a wife and a ten-month-old son. You can't possibly get by on less than such-and-such for living expenses and remain healthy. That leaves . . . hmm . . . three dollars and ten cents a month. You see how impossible it is? We don't doubt your integrity, but there must be ability to pay. You understand that?" So this would be the same old cracked record.

Damn damn damn. Damn the rat race of scraping along. Damn the day he had gotten the inspiration of getting some of the debts paid off by betting on the horses. Two bucks, two bucks. He had been two bucksed to death and had to miss payments and get behind on the rent.

Bill Nealy gulped the last of his coffee and got in line at the cashier's counter.

Upstairs the switchboard girl called to him that someone was on the line for him. Bill almost ran to his cubbyhole office. He found it hard to breathe as he picked up his phone—but not from shortness of breath.

"Mr. Nealy?" It was a male voice with a noticeable twang to it. "This is Mr. Scratch. Of Services, Incorporated."

Bill Nealy studied the man across the table from him at the Alt Heidelberg with a mixture of feelings.

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"Is the steak all right, Mr. Nealy?" Mr. Scratch asked.

"Excellent," Bill said. "You know, you look quite a bit like Walter Huston in his screen portrayal of the Devil."

"The other way around," Mr. Scratch said, expertly lifting a surprising pile of green peas on the end of his knife and shoving them into his mouth. "Intentional," he added through the peas and his long yellowed teeth with a smile. "As an advertising man yourself, you can understand that I couldn't let that golden opportunity for authenticity go to waste."

Bill Nealy slowly laid his fork beside his plate.

"Something wrong, Mr. Nealy?" Mr. Scratch asked, carving a large chunk off the thick juicy steak on his plate.

"No, of course not," Bill said with quiet bitterness. "It's a pattern. Yesterday I had a tip that was authentic. I put my last fifty dollars on a horse that was certain to win. It was a fixed race. Nothing could go wrong. In the stretch it was five lengths ahead. Then the horse broke its leg." Bill waved a hand vaguely. "Just like that!" he said thinly. "Now, today, I hear about a something called Services, Incorporated that can straighten out my mess, get me a job with enough money to live on. It *should* be possible to do that. I'm young, not too dumb, and more than willing to cooperate. I'm full of hope like I was yesterday. And what do I draw out of the bet?" Bill shook his head in defeat and said bitterly, "A nut. A plain screwball. Too bad you don't think you're Christ, you could go over to the *Tribune* and demand that they announce your second coming. I understand they get an average of one a week." Bill pushed his chair back. "Thanks for the lunch, anyway."

"But if I were to give you the money you need—and more?" Mr. Scratch said, grinning.

"And have your keeper make me give it back?" Bill said.

"Suppose I could convince you," Mr. Scratch said softly, leaning forward, his small eyes dancing. "Would you give me a chance to prove it? No obligation to do business involved?"

"I'll give you ten minutes," Bill said coldly. "Uh, excuse me a minute. Be right back." He got up and hurried away.

Mr. Scratch exchanged a knowing glance with a tall man standing near the door to the men's room toward which Bill was heading, then took out a toothpick and began absently picking his teeth.

Bill Nealy went past the tall man without noticing him, and pushed open the door to the men's room. Inside, he became aware he was alone. Stall doors stood open, white tile gleamed from the reflection of soft ceiling lights, muted sounds came from the res-

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taurant. The insistent call of nature suddenly vanished. That alone was remarkable. But there was an aura of unreality here in the men's room, and suddenly Bill's eyes widened and a chill prickled his scalp. On the white tile floor just inside one of the stalls lay a black leather billfold.

He pounced on it. As he straightened the outer door opened noisily and a tall man entered. Bill stepped inside the stall and pulled the door shut. With trembling fingers he explored the billfold, then stared in incredulous disbelief at what he found.

One bill. One lousy ten-dollar bill. A snorting laugh of disgust escaped his lips. For one second there . . . For one second he had been positive Mr. Scratch was the Devil and the billfold would be crammed with thousand-dollar bills.

He shoved the billfold in his pocket and left the stall. He didn't notice the tall man, nor the look of pity in his eyes. Outside the men's room he hesitated a moment. He was never quite sure afterwards why he didn't at that point simply walk out of the place and go back to work. Instead, he made his way back to the table and sat down with a poker face. Glancing at his watch significantly, he said, "All right, Mr. Scratch, I'll give you ten minutes."

"You must admit," Mr. Scratch said, "I used good yankee sense."

"What do you mean?" Bill Nealy asked innocently.

"Well," Mr. Scratch said, flicking his toothpick half way across the plush diningroom, "if you had discovered more than ten dollars in the billfold you wouldn't have come back to the table, and if you had discovered less you wouldn't have enough to profit from that longshot this afternoon."

Bill Nealy stared at Mr. Scratch for several minutes in silence. Finally he shook his head slowly in wonderment. "I'm half inclined to believe you," he said.

"Then you'll make a bargain with me?" Mr. Scratch said quickly, a greedy light in his eyes.

"It's crazy!" Bill Nealy protested. "This is the twentieth century, we have Sputniks and—and psychology!"

"So what?" Mr. Scratch said. "They don't bother me half so much as social security and income taxes. Records, records. By the way, let me warn you that you mustn't forget to report as taxable income the fifteen hundred dollars you're going to win this afternoon."

"I'm going to win?" Bill said skeptically.

"Well . . ." Mr. Scratch hedged. "It's only a little complicated. You'll win if you agree to do business with me if you win. Otherwise not."

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"My soul?" Bill said, amused.

"In a manner of speaking you might say so. Symbolisms change with the times, legends don't."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Probably nothing. The legend is close enough to go on."

"How long do I get everything I want?" Bill asked, then added, "It's just an academic question."

"Oh, I'd be quite fair," Mr. Scratch said. "Not definite, but fair. At least eighteen years, maybe as long as twenty-four."

"Hmm," Bill said. "My son would be grown up, I could see that my wife had an income."

"I was taking all that into consideration, Mr. Nealy."

"I suppose you'll want me to sign my name in blood—"

"Nope!" Mr. Scratch peeped. "Your word is good enough."

"It's a deal then," Bill said quickly, pushing back his chair again. "What's the horse?"

"Dark Angel in the fifth," Mr. Scratch said, and, as Bill started away, "Mind you, even I'm not perfect. Dark Angel could lose, but if she does I'll make it good out of my own pocket. And one thing more . . ."

"Yes?" Bill said impatiently.

"I don't start working for you until the money gets in your hands. Don't blame me for anything that happens between now and then."

"Dark Angel in the fifth?" Mick Costino said, his dark eyes flicking over the ten-dollar bill. He dropped it on the counter and went to wait on a man in front who bought some cigars, then came back and picked it up again. "Sure you want to throw this down the sewer? Everybody knows Dark Angel hasn't got over her sprained ligament. They haven't even posted odds on her. Of course, they'll have to if anyone places a bet."

"Take the bet or tell me where I can place it," Bill said, glancing around in search of Joe.

"I'll take it," Mick Costino said. He grinned wickedly. "Like taking candy from a baby." He went to the wall phone. When he came back he made out a stub. "Hundred and fifty to one odds," he grunted. "I'll give you the same odds you can't throw a hand grenade from out in the street and hit Moscow."

"Thanks," Bill said, pocketing the stub. "Maybe I'll take that bet—tomorrow. By the way, have you seen Joe? You know. Funny looking guy with narrow-set brown eyes. Hangs around—"

"Haven't seen him." Mick Costino smiled and said, "So long, sucker."

Bill Nealy was jumpy going back to the office. So far Mr. Scratch was right on the beam. If Dark Angel came in she would pay fifteen hundred dollars. But where did Joe fit into this? Was

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Joe one of Mr. Scratch's agents? Probably.

Work went slow. At two thirty Bill called home. He let the phone ring five times. Letta didn't answer, so finally he hung up. He hoped the ringing hadn't disturbed little Jimmy. It was Jimmy's nap time. Maybe Letta had run down to the supermarket to do her shopping.

Of course she had! This was Tuesday. It had been foolish of him to forget and call her. Maybe Jimmy woke up when the phone rang. He would cry . . .

To get rid of his uneasiness Bill plunged all the harder into his work, and made fair progress. After a while a darned good idea for the ad hit him. He worked it out, and before he knew it it was a quarter after five.

He thrust out of the office, his sweaty hand in his pocket clutching the bet stub, and let himself be compressed into the sardine-can elevator for a free-fall drop to the lobby.

He risked his life dodging across the street against a red light and hurried to the cigar store. Inside, Mick Costino met him with a bright grin.

"Boy, you made it!" Mick shouted. "Talk about falling in an outhouse!" He counted out the fifteen hundred in worn fifty-dollar bills, stacking them on the glass top of the cigar display. "Made turf history," he remarked soulfully. "Somehow Dark Angel picked up a practically three-legged sprint that was a sight to see. She came down the home stretch with that game leg waving all over the place, and passed Storm King and Mudflats like they were going the other way, to win by a length and a half!"

"Thanks," Bill Nealy said, stuffing the thirty fifty-dollar bills in his pocket and feeling very strange.

He turned—and Mr. Scratch stood in his way, looking very unSatan-like and very New Englandish in a double-breasted blue serge suit and home-ironed white shirt two sizes too large for his leathered neck.

"Congratulations, Nealy," Mr. Scratch said. "The reason I didn't wait until you were out on the street is that there's a little trouble. Your wife was struck by a car this afternoon and is at the emergency hospital, still unconscious."

"Good God!" Bill Nealy said, almost collapsing. "I've got to get to her!"

"Not just yet," Mr. Scratch said. "First there's little Jimmy to think of, all alone in the apartment and awake since your phone call woke him up at two thirty. He's messed and hungry, and has been crying a solid streak since then."

"He can stand it another hour without dying," Bill said, trying to get around Mr. Scratch.

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"But why not have the girl next door tend to him?" Mr. Scratch said, unmoving. "You can call her and tell her where to find the spare key. I've already looked up the phone number. It's G L seven, five nine four six. There's the phone on the wall behind you. It'll only take a minute. She's home. You know who she is, the girl with the corner off one of her front teeth."

"Yes," Bill said, remembering the girl. He had seen her several times in the two years he had lived at the apartment. About sixteen now, rather plain, with brown hair and no real distinguishing points except that chipped tooth. In a way it made her rather attractive.

"Her name's Mable," Mr. Scratch said while Bill was dialing the number.

The phone at the other end rang once, and then her voice sounded. Bill explained quickly what had happened and described where to find the key.

"Of course, Mr. Nealy," Mable said. "The poor little fellow. I'll take care of him right away. Don't you worry one bit. You go to your wife. I'll look after things."

"Thanks," Bill choked gratefully, and slammed the receiver.

"Let's hurry now," Mr. Scratch said with a trace of anxiety. "Letta's near death. I can save her, but it will be nip and tuck. I really should have done something for her sooner. But a bargain's a bargain, you know. I do think," he added accusingly as they rushed out to the street, "that you might have come to pick up your winnings sooner. I *hinted* plain enough, you know."

"I know," Bill groaned.

The taxi trip out of the Chicago Loop was nothing less than miraculous.

Traffic was at a standstill, but somehow the driver managed to keep going a steady thirty-five miles an hour, swinging to the wrong side of the street with utter disdain for oncoming cars, which seemed always to be halted by red lights or traffic cops.

Mr. Scratch relaxed in the seat beside Bill Nealy and watched things as though it were his first visit to Chicago. His small eyes were bright with interest, the toothpick between his lips gyrated now and then as he shifted it.

Bill sat forward on the edge of the seat, tense with worry all the way. Once Mr. Scratch said, "Relax. I'm on the job now." But he said it as though he knew it wouldn't do any good.

At the hospital Bill learned that no, they had no record of a Mrs. Nealy, yes, a woman traffic victim had been brought in at two thirty-five, still unidentified, no, she had not yet regained consciousness, and yes, he could see if it was his wife.

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Bill waved a fistful of fifty-dollar bills under starched noses like lettuce, and the starched noses sniffed in disdain like rabbit noses, but suddenly there were plenty of such noses to wave the fistful of fifty-dollar bills under and he was Mr. Nealy and the hospital was a smooth machine that functioned swiftly.

Technicians murmured such phrases as broken ribs, punctured lungs, internal bleeding, then rushed to take new x-rays. Mr. Scratch stayed in the background, his eyes squinted up, the toothpick moving thoughtfully, or poised in study.

Then the murmur of such phrases as I can't understand it, some mistake, impossible, someone should get fired, who took those first x-rays?

"Bill! Thank God!" And Letta had opened her eyes, and Mr. Scratch was openly scowling at her words. Letta's eyes passed over him idly in her survey of her surroundings, then returned to him. She turned to Bill and reached up, putting her arms around his neck and pulled his head down next to hers. "Who is that man, Bill?" she whispered. "I saw him on the sidewalk just before that car struck me."

"He found me and told me about the accident," Bill whispered back.

"Oh," Letta said, sounding strangely relieved.

"And a neighbor girl is taking care of Jimmy," Bill added quickly.

"I've got to get home," Letta said, sitting up.

This precipitated argument, discussion, and further examination. Finally it was agreed that Letta should remain in the hospital overnight and if she were all right in the morning she could go home. A sedative stilled her protests. Her last waking gaze was on Mr. Scratch, searching, uneasy, while her husband held her hand.

Outside the hospital, Mr. Scratch said, "Well, Mr. Nealy, I trust you are fully aware now that I'm working for you. Your wife would undoubtedly have died without my intervention."

Bill hesitated, then said, "It would seem so—now."

"A bargain's a bargain," Mr. Scratch said. "You'll find that I keep my word. Much easier these days than it used to be. Why not have dinner with me before going home? There's a very good restaurant a couple of blocks from here."

"I'd like to get home," Bill said.

"Nonsense. Besides, this is the last time you'll see me—until I come to collect."

A chill shot through Bill Nealy. He looked up at the cloudless sky, the bright stars, the full moon. Suns, and a satellite of Earth, the material universe of order and law, far removed from

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superstitions of the past. He lowered his gaze again, to look at the strange figure of a man standing beside him.

"Oh, I'm real enough," Mr. Scratch said. "As real as the rest of it. I'm hungry, too."

The food was excellent. After they ordered, Bill called home to make sure the neighbor girl was there and little Jimmy was all right. Reassured, he relaxed and enjoyed the meal, but a mild worry nagged at him. Over dessert he voiced this worry.

"Mr. Scratch," he said. "If this is the last time I'll see you—for a while—how will you be keeping your bargain?"

"Oh, that . . ." Mr. Scratch said, searching his pockets and bringing out a fresh toothpick. "In this day and age it's fairly simple to fulfill my side of the bargain. In the old days it took a giant organization working round the clock to find and make a note of buried treasures and such. Nowadays riches are a point of view. Take that idea you got for that ad this afternoon. What is it worth?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid," Bill winced. "It isn't a very good idea."

"That's where you're wrong," Mr. Scratch said, chuckling. "For underwear, wasn't it? It's going to make people underwear conscious. That idea, plus a couple more you will have in the next week, will make you a partner in the firm. In a few months when you've sort of oriented yourself to your modern pot of gold, sit down and decide how much money you want a year. Fifty thousand? A million? It's yours. Ideas are the pots of gold, the buried treasures, today. But only if other people think they are. What other people think of them sets their value, and that's where I do my work. Not work, really. In today's world thousands of editors and movie producers and industrial kings sit at their desks with billions of dollars to give away for scraps of paper with scribbling or typing on them—anxious to give that money away. One scrap of paper is worth incredible sums, another worth nothing, but only the right people thinking so makes the difference." Mr. Scratch picked his long yellowed teeth absently. "You need have no fear I'll fulfill *my* part of our bargain."

"What assurance do you have I'll fulfill mine—when the time comes, Mr. Scratch?" Bill asked softly.

Mr. Scratch blinked at him thoughtfully, the grin dwindling from his lips. Suddenly he brightened. "Oh that!" he snorted. "You're thinking of that story about me again. Good propaganda. Let the suckers—pardon me, present company excepted of

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course—think that someone succeeded, and they flock to me in droves. You'd be surprised. Why, when that Huston movie was showing in the theaters I could tell which cities and towns it was playing by the dozens that rushed home to chant some magic spell designed to contact me so they could strike a bargain with me that they had no intention of keeping. It never fails. Get a sucker to believing he's a slicker and you've hooked him every time." Mr. Scratch stared shrewdly at Bill Nealy. "*You* weren't thinking of something like that, were you?" he asked, his grin flicking on and off.

"Not that," Bill said. "It's something else. You see, Mr. Scratch, I didn't really believe in you. I wasn't convinced. Now I am. And I've decided to drop it right now. We've signed no agreement. I'm backing out. Right now. That's fair and honest, isn't it, Mr. Scratch?"

"You *present* it honestly enough," Mr. Scratch said, not smiling. "However, there's a little matter of the fifteen hundred dollars, not to mention your wife's life." Mr. Scratch pursed his lips as though in deep thought. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, brightening. "I'll give you a chance to back out. You've shown that you're a fair man. You could have gone on for twenty years accepting my bounty with the intention of cheating me in the end. You didn't. So give me back the fifteen hundred dollars and I'll return your wife to the condition shown by the first x-rays, and we'll call it quits." He reached his hand across the table, his small, narrow-set eyes crinkled in a smile.

"You *are* the Devil!" Bill whispered. "That would be deliberately killing my wife!"

"It's your choice," Mr. Scratch said, still holding out his hand.

Bill shook his head slowly. "I can't do that," he said. "But I'm going to do this: I'm going to use the fifteen hundred to pay my bills. Then I'm never going to gamble again, and I'm going to refuse all help from you. I'm going to work as I have, and if you try to bribe me by making my ideas bring me more money than they should, I'm going to give all of it but bare living expenses to the church. Then when you come for me, if you dare, I'll fight you with everything I have or can command."

Mr. Scratch grinned, still holding out his hand. "It won't work, Mr. Nealy," he said with crisp assurance. "Believe me, you have no choice—except the one I just offered you."

"And I've turned that down," Bill said. "Just how can you collect if I refuse to accept anything from you during the next twenty years?"

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Mr. Scratch slowly pulled his hand back. He picked his teeth in deep study, his eyes on the tablecloth. Then he looked up. "You really want to know?" he said. "You would be better off not knowing. That way you could live with a hope of escaping me."

"I really want to know," Bill said. "*How can you collect?*"

Mr. Scratch stared at Bill another moment, then dipped his head in acknowledgment of the question.

Hitching himself sideways in his chair and crossing his legs, Mr. Scratch said, "What is the soul?"

"More coffee, gentlemen?" a cheerful voice intruded.

Mr. Scratch and Bill Nealy looked up at the smiling face of the waitress.

"Yes, please," Mr. Scratch said. He waited until she was gone, then continued. "What is the soul? I doubt that you know, Mr. Nealy, but you will when I have finished." He was silent for a while, staring into space. Then he shook his head sharply and seemed to return to an awareness of his surroundings. "Today," he said, "people don't really believe in much of anything but materialism. Oh, they give lip service, but put it all down to superstition and fantasy. Believe me, I wish it were only that. I would like to not exist. The time is coming when mankind will understand me instead of merely believing in me . . . ."

Mr. Scratch lapsed into silence for a moment, then sighed.

"Psychology," he said, "is the study of a science just as real as the science of matter. Almost no real progress has been made in it by man. True, *some* progress has been made. Enough so that you can think of Pavlov and Freud and get a picture of the first beginning of an exact science of the mind. A science such as I have mastered and shaped to my own compulsive urges. Yes, I have such drives and I understand their nature and sources. Understanding that which cannot be corrected does nothing to correct it. Do you see a little of what I am saying, Mr. Nealy?"

"A little," Bill said, puzzled and somewhat uncomfortable at this personal confession.

"It's true that I tricked you into a dilemmic choice," Mr. Scratch said with an apologetic shrug. "But my motive is not the one you see on the surface. Not sadistic amusement. It is much deeper, more long-range. I make you my victim so that one day you will become my equal. It's as simple as that. When that time comes you will love me as a brother, but not until you have embraced in full consciousness the complete horror of what I have made of you . . . .

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"Consider," Mr. Scratch went on in quiet clipped tones. "Your son is awakened by the ringing of the phone. He cries, expecting his mother to come to him as she always does. The phone rings for a time, then stops. There is no sound but his own crying. He is hungry, his diaper needs changing. He doesn't know these things. He only knows that a hunger gnaws at him, that discomfort and soreness dominate his awareness. But he doesn't even know this, in words. It is basic raw feeling. It increases in intensity, decreasing a little now and then from exhaustion, then reaching new peaks with an accompaniment of hysteria. The moments seem hours, the hours seem eternities.

"Then suddenly and without prelude a face appears. It is the face of a girl about sixteen or eighteen years of age. It smiles. At once his attention is fixed on the one major distinguishing factor, a chipped eyetooth, oddly rather attractive, and made wonderful as he finds his discomforts wonderfully replaced by comforts. The face hovers over him, indelibly associated with the intense relief he is experiencing from the terrible suffering and hysteria that formerly possessed him. It hovers above him, that smile revealing the strangely attractive tooth, as he finally closes his eyes in peaceful exhaustion. Do you picture that, Mr. Nealy?"

Mr. Scratch remained silent while Bill's eyes slowly came to focus on him. "Yes," Bill said. "But what are you driving at? This is what happened of course, but it's rather confusing to see how it connects with anything."

"Is it?" Mr. Scratch said, his small eyes peculiarly intense. "Think a bit. By now he has forgotten it. *He will never remember it again.* It will lie in the foundations of his mind, a psychotically intense attachment for a symbol, unconnected to words or conscious thought. Dormant, until . . . who knows? Sixteen years? Twenty-four? Sooner or later he will meet a girl who has a tooth with the corner chipped off, giving her the same peculiar charm when she smiles. Her face will unlock the buried symbol."

"He will fall in love with her!" Bill whispered.

"Instantly," Mr. Scratch said, his eyes glowing like dark coals. "But unlocking the symbol of the rescuer also unlocks the horror he was rescued from, the physical discomforts, the hunger and thirst —now attached to sex. And the terrible loneliness of those hours today when he cried and his mother didn't come, the hysteria. Do you see it? He will *demand* that she love him, and then, of course, she cannot. To her, whoever she may be, he will appear to be slightly mad, quite frightening.

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"She will repulse him. The symbol of rescue will not bring the relief it did so long ago when he was a baby. The revived hysteria will increase. He will kill her!"

"No!" Bill whispered. "I can't believe it!"

"It happens every day," Mr. Scratch said. "You read in the papers of some young man, completely normal, intelligent, well-adjusted, suddenly falling in love with a girl he just met, being repulsed, and killing her. Why? In his confession he insists he doesn't know why he did it. Something *made* him do it." Mr. Scratch leaned forward, resting on his elbows. "Things like this happen all the time," he went on. "They are invariably the result of what your psychiatrists call a trauma, planted in the infant mind in the cradle—by the accident of circumstance. Blind circumstance.

"But not with your son. With him it has been deliberately planted *as a result of your own decision.*"

"A decision I was tricked into!" Bill Nealy said.

Mr. Scratch shook his head, his grin revealing his long yellow teeth. "No, Mr. Nealy," he said. "In your heart you know you weren't tricked. Even a few minutes ago when I held out my hand to take back that fifteen hundred dollars you couldn't bring yourself to give it up. Even now you can't."

"Yes I can!" Bill Nealy said, bringing out his billfold with fingers that trembled violently.

"All right, give it to me," Mr. Scratch said, holding out his hand.

Bill Nealy looked into the glowing eyes of Mr. Scratch, hesitating. "My wife—she won't die?" he said. "My son won't become a murderer?"

Mr. Scratch laughed softly. "You see?" he said. "You can't give up the money. You'll use it. You'll want more. You'll need a lot to give your son and wife all the finer things of life to salve your conscience." Mr. Scratch stood up and looked down at Bill Nealy. "On the day your son is executed," he said, his nasal twang businesslike, "you will know within yourself that I have collected my debt in full measure. Good day, Mr. Nealy."

With a curt nod of dismissal Mr. Scratch started to turn away.

"Wait!" Bill Nealy said desperately. "Why have you told me this? Don't you know I will spend my life trying to prevent it? I will pray to God—"

Mr. Scratch's face contorted with rage. He leaned over the table, his flaming eyes inches from Bill's. "God Himself couldn't change it now," he snarled, *"or He would have changed me!"*

Abruptly the expression of rage on Mr. Scratch's face changed to alarm. He started to straighten up and twist around. He froze be-

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fore he was completely turned, and a pencil-thin beam of bright blue light touched his forehead.

Bill Nealy turned his head toward the source of the beam. Joe was standing ten feet away, the beam of light coming from a small, gleaming black tube held in his hand.

"Joe!" Bill cried in surprise, starting to rise.

"Sit still, Bill," Joe said, not taking his eyes from Mr. Scratch.

Bill Nealy's eyes went back to Mr. Scratch. An aura of superhuman power seemed to emanate from Mr. Scratch, as though he were about to burst free of the bonds of flesh. The beam of blue power seemed to soak into his forehead.

Then suddenly the pencil-thin beam leaped aside. Mr. Scratch staggered, then caught himself. With a cry of terrible rage he ran toward Joe, half stumbling as though he didn't have full command of his legs.

Joe was in the grip of the maitre d' who was indignantly asking him to explain his actions.

Mr. Scratch shoved the maitre d' aside and tried to grab the black tube, but he didn't seem able to curve his fingers around it. With an animal cry he shoved Joe violently backward, then ran toward the front with grotesque leaps. A moment later he had vanished through the door to the street.

Joe was sitting up, shaking his head to clear it. He had hit his head on the edge of the table when Mr. Scratch shoved him. He looked around, then scrambled to his feet in alarm.

"We've got to catch him, Bill!" he said. "Hurry!"

Ignoring the shouts of the maitre d' they ran out of the restaurant. A taxi had just pulled away from the curb. They saw a face contorted with hate looking at them through the back window of the cab as it sped away.

"He'll head for your apartment," Joe said. "He'll try to get at your son!"

Another taxi was visible two blocks away, cruising slowly toward them. Bill ran into the street and waved frantically. The taxi driver saw him and picked up speed.

They piled into the taxi and Bill gave the address. "Fifty dollars if you break all speed laws and get us there in time!" he pleaded.

The driver's eyebrows shot up at the sight of the fifty-dollar bill and he hunched over the wheel, shooting forward. "I know a couple of shortcuts!" he shouted.

Bill unlocked the apartment door and pushed it open. There had been no sign of Mr. Scratch or his taxi outside. Was he already here? A woman appeared in the bedroom doorway.

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"Hello, Mr. Nealy," she said cheerfully. She looked past Bill's shoulder and added, "Hello, Joe. I see you found him." She smiled at Bill and explained, "I'm Mrs. Kirski. I live down the hall."

"Hello, Mr. Nealy," the girl with the chipped tooth said, appearing behind Mrs. Kirski with the baby in her arms. "I'm Mable. When I got your call I came right over. Joe was knocking on your door, and when I told him about the baby he made me go get Mrs. Kirski before he would let me unlock the door."

"Is anyone else here?" Bill interrupted her.

"No," Mable said. She smiled, and Bill stared at her chipped tooth, unable to take his eyes from it. Her smile widened. "Joe didn't think I knew about babies and said we should have someone with experience, so I got Mrs. Kirski."

"We all took care of Jimmy," Mrs. Kirski said. "Joe took charge just like a woman. He certainly has a way with babies!" She smiled fondly at Joe.

"He's awfully fussy though," Mable said, her chipped tooth giving her smile a peculiar charm. "He wouldn't let anyone do anything longer than a minute, and kept making little Jimmy look at each of us while we worked on him."

"Put Jimmy to bed, Mable," Mrs. Kirski said. "Now that Mr. Nealy's home you'd better run on home and get some supper." She touched Bill's shoulder. "I'll be running along too. Now if you need me for anything I'm just down the hall in the end apartment."

Finally Mrs. Kirski and Mable were gone. Bill Nealy sagged his back against the door and said to Joe, "Will he come?"

"He'll come," Joe said grimly. "He has to."

"Who are you?" Bill said wonderingly. "You got me into this and now you seem to be getting me out of it. As though you used me as bait for a trap. Why me? And that weapon, like something out of a science fiction comic book. It's all mixed up. An extraterrestial trapping Satan and getting away with it. And you must think Mr. Scratch's plan to warp Jimmy so he would kill a girl when he grew up would work, from the precautions you took."

"It would have worked," Joe said. "Your psychologists haven't begun to explore such things yet, but you see the results in the papers quite often. Someone with a complete mastery of these things can shape the infant to become anything when it grows up, during its first year."

"That seems hard to believe," Bill Nealy said.

"It's true, nevertheless," Joe said. "I should know. . . . Thou-

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sands of years ago, when this was just beginning to be known, I created Mr. Scratch as he is now —deliberately." Joe saw the expression on Bill Nealy's face and smiled bitterly. "No, I'm not God, nor is Mr. Scratch Satan. We're only human, though immortal, and we originated on a planet very similar to Earth, in the system your astronomers call Sirius, the dog star.

"I deliberately created your Mr. Scratch because, at the time, I believed I could instil correctives. That is, I thought that by teaching him, instilling in him a complete knowledge of psychology, it would be possible for him to correct himself. I found out that it wouldn't work that way."

"Did he know you had done this to him?" Bill Nealy asked.

Joe nodded. "Naively, as I know now, I thought the knowledge would help him. His basic mental structure had been formed arbitrarily and could by the same token be corrected arbitrarily—I believed. When I finally realized that wasn't true, I was getting ready to take other measures to correct him when he became aware of what I intended and fled from the planet. I followed him but lost him, and since then I've been searching planet after planet, until finally, a year ago, I arrived on Earth. I knew at once he was here. The history of Earth was far from normal, I quickly found. But where could I find him?

"It didn't take long to find traces of his pattern. I soon narrowed things down to Chicago as his headquarters in this country, and found out his point of contact was a post office box. I had to smoke him out without his suspecting who it was. When you first met me and I found out you have an only child, a son less than a year old, I knew you were the best choice I could make to contact him. You know the rest."

"How about his saving my wife's life?" Bill said. "And my winning fifteen hundred dollars? And the billfold I found with ten dollars in it?"

Joe chuckled. "Your wife wasn't injured. Doped or hypnotized. One of Scratch's stooges drove a car at her and stopped it when she stumbled and fell in trying to get out of its way. At the hospital some x-rays of an old injury case were used by the lab technician to make the new ones, or were already prepared and were substituted by someone else. When you and your Mr. Scratch arrived on the scene they took new and genuine x-rays.

"The race you bet on was fixed. The billfold in the men's room was planted. It wouldn't have taken a Mr. Scratch to do any of those things."

"But my sudden urge to go to the men's room?" Bill said.

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"A parlor trick any good hypnotist could accomplish by post-hypnosis, but he probably accomplished it by telepathic suggestion. You see, everything he did was for the purpose of convincing you absolutely that you were in a pact with the Devil, so that when your son became a murderer and was caught and executed, you would be convinced it was a result of your own deliberate choice. Once convinced of that, you would kill yourself or disintegrate mentally from the horrible guilt complex, and he would watch you and gain a small symbolic revenge against me.

"He feels sorry for himself and thinks I should suffer as he intended to suffer in my place. Down the centuries he's done that to thousands of people as a symbolism of what he would like to see happen to me.

"And now he will see it happen to me. Back there in the restaurant he didn't have time to think. When that man stopped me from destroying him, he fled. But now he knows I'm here, knows I'm in this room. He'll come.

"He'll come because he knows I have to kill him. There's no possible cure for him any more. He'll come and let me kill him now because he knows I'm forced to, *because I'll go on forever, never able to die, always living with the knowledge that I killed—my own son!*" A tear glistened in Joe's eye. "Now do you see?" he said. "The whole pattern—why it has to be?"

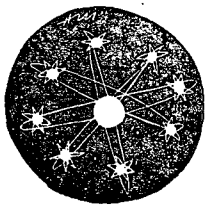
Joe took the glistening black tube out of his pocket.

"Step away from the door, Bill," he whispered. "Mr. Scratch is outside. In a moment he will come through that door."

Bill Nealy leaped away from the door, startled. From the other side of the room he watched the door, his eyes wide. There was no sound in the room but the deliberate ticking of the clock on the mantel.

Then, slowly, the gleaming chrome knob of the door began to turn.

And Bill Nealy, for the first time in his life, fainted. When he awoke he was alone, but a faint odor of burnt flesh and the sterile scent of steel smelters clung to his nostrils, and in the air above him streamers of gray smoke lazily drifted.



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The Science Stage

ENDGAME, by Samuel Beckett, at the Cherry Lane Theatre, with Alvin Epstein, Lester Rawlins, P. J. Kelley, and Nydia Westman, directed by Alan Schneider, designed by David Hays.

The producers of ENDGAME proclaim it as part of a "theatre of ideas," presumably of ideas so profound that no one can be certain what they are. The presumption of profundity is heightened by the atmosphere of gloom, horror, and death. ENDGAME tells of four individuals, the last ones left alive, awaiting the end of the world. With great skill, Alan Schneider's direction has inspired Beckett's exercise in despair with a ghoulish life that has a fitful fever all its own before the last move is played. He has received considerable help in fine performances by Alvin Epstein and Lester Rawlins as the two main players, and Nydia Westman and P. J. Kelley as characters who inhabit ashcans and pop up now and then to add a note of macabre humor. With the benefit of such inspired direction and performance, the play is bearable, if not exactly entrancing. I hate to think what it would have been in lesser hands.

ENDGAME is fantastic enough, but it is not a play at all by the usual standards, and certainly, with all due deference to the producers, not a play of ideas. It has occasional striking lines and it has many ordinary ones strikingly delivered. But instead of ideas it has symbols, which are a dime a dozen in modern literature, and a mood of intense disgust with the world. The world is not worth living in, says Beckett—and certainly, if you are any of the characters he has created, of whom one cannot stand, one cannot sit, and the other two are planted miserably in their ashcans waiting for death, he has a point.

As Beckett himself, however, is not reduced to the situation of his characters, and presumably enjoys the modest fame and royalties that accrue from his literary work, it is not out of place to wonder why a man who has such contempt for the rest of the world takes the trouble to send it a message, even a message of despair.

DARK OF THE MOON, by Howard Richardson and William Berney, at the Carnegie Hall Playhouse. With Ann Hillary and John Brachita. Production designed and lighted by Furth Ullman, choreography by Barton Mumaw, directed by Norman Roland.

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DARK OF THE MOON is a fantasy of a distinctly different breed. Based on the folk song "Barbara Allen," it is the story of a witch boy who falls in love with an all too human girl, leaves his female witch friends, and becomes human himself to marry his love. His status as *Homo sapiens*, however, is only temporary. It can become permanent only if the girl is faithful to him for an entire year.

Naturally, the witch girls and his human enemies both work against him. As the year's end approaches, poor Barbara is subjected to the emotional upheaval of an old-time revival and given to understand that she can save her soul only by committing a sin, which it turns out ain't no sin at all because it's for a good cause. Under heavy moral pressure, she yields temporarily to immorality and dies for her foolishness, while the son of a witch she married flies off with his bad companions, whom he now finds good company.

DARK OF THE MOON has its weakness, but I found it distinctly worth seeing, and I enjoyed listening to its folk melodies. Critics with fond memories are a curse of the theatre; but I recall that the production on Broadway some thirteen years ago was more effective. The leading roles were better played, the revival scene had more impact, and the mood was better sustained. Lighting is an important part of a fantasy of this kind, and I had a feeling that certain scenes in DARK OF THE MOON were so brightly lit as to suggest sunlight rather than moonlight. Moreover, it seemed to me that some of the mountain characters were much too citified.

Nonetheless, I hope that DARK OF THE MOON stays in its orbit for a long time. With all its faults, it is good entertainment, and compared to some of the productions that reach Broadway, a masterpiece.

By the time you read this, Shaw's BACK TO METHUSELAH will have opened, starring Tyrone Power, Faye Emerson and Arthur Treacher. The original G.B.S. version was a cycle of five plays taking nine hours of performance time. The new version by Arnold Moss has been cut to two and a half hours, merely by eliminating some of Shaw's garrulity (or so we are told) and rearranging. We shall see.

WILLIAM MORRISON

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In which dendrophile deFord (cf. The Daughter of the Tree, *F&SF, August, 1951) leads us into haunting folkways of a wholly alien civilization.*

Gathi

by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

I DON'T WANT TO SEEM MEAN OR cranky, but your father and I are getting old, and he's never really recovered from that leaf-curl, and it's too much for us to have to be baby-shading for your seedlings *all* the time. If you won't take care of them yourself once in a while, I'm going to have to complain to the grove-masters.

I don't know what's got into the younger generation. It's against dendroid behavior, the way you act. I know you and your trunkmate have other interests, and all we old trees are good for any more, in your opinion, is to provide shade for the young.

And don't tell me I don't love my own little descendants.

Of course I love them—is there a sweeter feeling than that of a tender green tendril wrapping itself around one's gnarled old bark? But they slither and rustle and leaf-talk all the time, and we're tired and need our rest. It's just as I claimed from the beginning: young couples when they're ready to root together ought to stake out a place of their own, and not crowd in on the spot they were seeded in. It isn't as if you were really my daughter, seeded directly from me; your father and I are both pushing 2000, and sky knows how many generations away from me you two really are, my dear. Calling all one's living ancestors father and mother, and all one's descendants, no matter how many generations off, son and daughter, is merely a convenience, not an obligation. My own immediate children, I seem to remember, were much more considerate—and still are, the ones still young enough to seed.

The thing is, we were brought up very differently when I was young. I can recall my mother—my own, immediate mother—giving me the rules when I was barely more than a seedling myself. "Always be thoughtful of

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grown trees—don't disturb them. Don't be always overroot with them. Play around all you like with your young friends—that's the way you'll be able to choose wisely when you're old enough to root and mate. Get your fair share of sun and water, so you'll grow up into a beautiful straight tree that we'll be proud to be the parents of. And never, never do anything to make us call in the grove-masters to punish you."

We were respectful of the grove-masters in those days; we were even afraid of them, though in a way they are our servants. Nowadays the young folk affect to despise them. What advantage have they over us, you youngsters say, except being mobile all their lives?—and that, you add, is only an instance of permanent immaturity we've evolved beyond; no grove-master has the intellect of a tree.

Which may all be very true—I don't pretend to understand this new psychology—but the fact remains that the grove-masters still have the power of life and death over us. If they neglect us or expose us to blight, we may live on, but we can never be parents. And then if we have the misfortune to outlive our contemporaries, we may be left solitary in the forest, with no one to communicate with for hundreds of lonely years. It's dangerous to offend the grove-masters.

Like Gathi. You came from another grove to root with our remote son; perhaps you've never heard about her.

Gathi and I were seeded almost at the same time, and we were saplings together. She budded out before I did, when she was barely 100, and right away she became interested in boys. "I'm young," she used to say to me rebelliously. "I'll be rooted soon enough, and I want to have fun while I'm free. If a boy wants to rustle leaves with me, why shouldn't I let him?"

"Gathi," I used to tell her, "it will be another hundred years before we're rooted, and you'll have plenty of time for fun and games when your buds and leaflets are a bit less green and tender. Why rush things? I know what the old trees say sounds stuffy, but it's true: a girl who doesn't know how to take care of herself can get into a lot of trouble. What tree will ever want to be your trunkmate if you let your bark be lost before you're ready for rooting?"

"Oh, you *seedling!*" Gathi would cry contemptuously, and off she'd be, rubbing twigs with some other precocious young sprout.

"He has the dreamiest green leaves!" she'd rave. "He's so tall and slender, and his trunk is brown when he's only a hundred and twenty-five!" Then soon

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she'd be crazy about another.

The grove-masters warned her over and over, but she paid no more attention to them than she did to me.

So what happened? When her time came for rooting, there wasn't a boy she knew who would look at her. They'd all fooled around with her for a century; she was nothing they wanted to settle down for life with. I had found my own trunkmate by then, and our roots had begun to grow around each other lovingly. Gathi was still root-loose and beginning to get worried. Is there anything more dreadful than to be an untrunkmated tree?

It cost Gathi a lot of pride to have to go to the grove-masters at last for advice and help, and she didn't like what she got.

"You belong in our grove," they told her, "and we're responsible for you. How many times have we told you that no good ever comes of the kind of life you've been leading? We can't have wild trees growing unattached in the grove, playing rootsie with other women's mates. Our business is to build the grove into a healthy unit, and trees that can't fit in will have to be blighted."

That, of course, scared her silly—a girl who had never suffered even so much as a branch-scrape.

"Please, please," she begged them, all her pride gone. "Anything but that—I'll do anything."

"Very well," said the head grove-master—the one with the blue wings. "There is an old tree here—you know him: Borthi. He's nine hundred, but he's still young enough to seed, and to provide shade and nourishment for his seedlings till they grow up. His mate was struck by lightning last year, and fell. He is looking for another."

Gathi turned pale chartreuse, and shook so that all her twigs rattled. But she had reached the time of rooting; she dared not stand still a minute lest her roots settle in the earth.

Oh, she fought against her fate. I don't think Borthi had much joy of his second marriage. Gathi became the scandal of the grove. She had an incurable case of wandering roots. Every married woman within reaching distance of her had grounds for complaint, and carried her grievance to the grove-masters. The boys Gathi used to play around with were all grown and trunkmated now, and their wives hadn't forgotten Gathi's reputation. I must say in fairness that she was blamed for plenty she never did; but perhaps I'm prejudiced in her favor because my trunkmate—your father—was the only one she never flirted with: she and I had been friends from the seed, and besides, my husband never so much as touched leaves with another girl after we'd found each other.

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And you can't altogether blame poor Gathi. Borthi had no bad habits, and he was a good provider; their saplings, as they came along, were healthy and handsome. But he wasn't much company for a girl like her.

Things couldn't go on like that forever. The grove-masters came to her, since she could no longer visit them, and laid down an ultimatum.

"If it weren't for our respect for Borthi," they told her right in his hearing, "we'd have skipped service to you two long ago. You'd have become a sterile couple forever. We know we made this marriage, and we've done our best to preserve it. What about you, Borthi? Do you want her blasted?"

That's probably what saved her life, for Borthi answered grumpily that he couldn't care less—he'd rather spend the rest of his 3000 years alone than with a wife like that. That offended the grove-masters with him too. One of them said to him sarcastically, "Well, Borthi, it takes two to make a happy trunkmating. There's more to life than air and water. Perhaps if once in a while you rustled leaves or rubbed branches with her, Gathi might learn to keep her wandering roots at home."

Borthi just grunted, and Gathi snickered. I heard the whole thing; they lived right next to us. I was frightened; I was sure that the grove-masters would simply end the whole controversy by condemning them both. But I suppose they felt a bit guilty themselves—after all, the marriage was their doing. So they gave Gathi another warning, and went away.

After that, Gathi seemed to settle down. Our part of the grove grew a lot quieter; there was no more of the constant leaf-shaking and branch-rattling which had been going on as indignant wives told each other their troubles, or went after Gathi. I began to hope that she had learned her lesson, and I was terribly sorry for her—she had been such a gay, vivacious girl, and now through her own foolishness she was tied to a husband more than four times her age.

It was autumn, and soon we'd all be overcome by the winter sleep, when even the grove-masters rest and the whole world lies still under the peaceful snow. I did, I remember, notice and wonder about a good-looking young sapling, a boy of the generation after ours, who seemed to be spending an awful lot of his time circling around our corner of the grove. Once in moonlight I saw him and Gathi with their branches intertwined. Borthi must have been dozing, the way we do as we grow older. It worried me, but I didn't say anything. I told myself that what she felt for him must surely be maternal love

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—though he was mighty near rooting-time for that.

Then winter came, and everything quieted down as always, until the grove-masters should waken us in the spring.

As long as I live—which is at least 1000 years more—I shall never forget the sight that lay before me when I stretched my branches and scratched my first leaf-buds of the season, that morning of early spring.

Near us, where Borthi and Gathi had stood in their uneasy trunkmating, he lay prone on the still frozen ground. His bark was gray and dry, and what few leaves still clung to his branches were sere and brittle skeletons.

And the Mark was on him. He hadn't died of freezing, as sometimes happens to old trees; he was far from old enough for that. Low down on his trunk was a white ring. He had been—excuse me for saying the word: only strong language can express what I felt—he had been Girdled!

And above his corpse, veiled in light green already and shimmering happily, stood Gathi.

But not alone. Next to her, rooted, was the young sapling in whose branches I had seen her embraced, that night in autumn.

There was only one way it could have been done. I had heard of such things—they were legends our parents used to scare us with when we were young—but never before had I discovered that they were true.

When we settle down for the winter with the snow coverlet over our roots, and our sap quiets for the long sleep, and the grove-masters themselves cease their care of us—some say they go to some other forest far away, where it is summer in our winter, but that I think is a myth—then the Evil Ones roam the groves. They are mobile like the grove-masters, but they are not our caretakers and keepers as the grove-masters are: far from it—they wish us ill. They cannot harm us, the old trees told us, unless we are wicked too; but if we are, they can sense us, calling them.

Gathi and her young lover had called them.

They must have been mad, both of them. Did they think they could escape?

The grove-masters let him be blighted; he died slowly.

But to Gathi they did worse. They let her live.

That's Gathi, over there—that faded, shriveled, twisted tree. A few warped leaves break out each year on her withered branches. Her saplings have long ago deserted her; when their time came to root they settled as far from her as they could go. No one speaks to her. I tried for a long time, but she never answered, so for many years now I have let her alone.

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Beside her, until her isolation ends in death, lies the body of the husband whose murder she incited. There are still a few black stalks tangled in her lower boughs —all that is left of her last lover.

No, child, the grove-masters may be long-suffering, but they are not to be despised. Perhaps they haven't our intellect, perhaps their permanent mobility means that they are not evolved as far as we are: but without them, we can't live normal lives. If we offend them beyond forgiveness, as poor Gathi did, they will punish us as she was punished.

. . . No, of course, I'm not implying that your thoughtlessness can be compared to her sin. I'm only saying that the old ways, when we were considerate of our elders, and when we went in wholesome fear of offending the grove-masters, had their points.

I don't want to have to complain to them about you, and, as I said, I don't want to seem mean or cranky. But your father and I *are* getting old, and I wish to sky you'd let us have some rest and take a little care of your own seedlings, some of the time at least.

Or let them go play around Gathi. There's still a little shade in her branches, and it would be a kindly deed.

Origin of the Species

I can see it now: they were ready to lift gravs
(Or whatever they did) but the cats weren't in the ship.
"Here, kitty!" they called, in whatever outlandish way
They spoke to cats; but the cats were out in the sun
Rolling about and sparring, and didn't come.
They held the airlock open, with tentacles
Or claws or something, that clenched impatiently
(I know how they felt) but the cats still wouldn't come.
And then they tried to catch them; well, what good
Has that ever done, when cats don't feel like coming?
The cats scampered off, flicking their tails in the air,
And all climbed up in some trees; and there they sat
Sneeringly patient. Nothing could be done—
It was time to leave—they put it in the log,
"Third planet of Athfan's Star; the cats deserted."

KAREN ANDERSON

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In which Mr. Knight is unexpectedly visited by the spirit of Ferdinand Feghoot.

Eripmav

by DAMON KNIGHT

On the planet Veegl, in the Fomalhaut system, we found a curious race of cellulose vampires. The Veeglians, like all higher life on their world, are plants; the Veeglian vampire, needless to say, is a sapsucker.

One of the native clerks in our trade mission, a plant-girl named Xixl, had been complaining of lassitude and showing an unhealthy pink color for some weeks. The girl's parent stock suspected vampirism; we were skeptical, but had to admit that the two green-tinged punctures at the base of her axis were evidence of something wrong.

Accordingly, we kept watch over her sleep-box for three nights running. (The Veeglians sleep in boxes of soil, built of heavy slabs of the hardmeat tree, or *woogl;* they look rather like coffins.) On the third night, sure enough, a translator named Ffengl, a hefty, blue-petaled fellow, crept into her room and bent over the sleep-box.

We rushed out at the blackguard, but he turned quick as a wink and fairly flew up the whitemeat stairs. (The flesh of Veegl's only animal life, the "meat-trees," or *oogl,* petrifies rapidly in air and is much used for construction.) We found him in an unsuspected vault at the very top of the old building, trying to hide under the covers of an antique burial bed. It was an eery business. We sizzled him with blasts from our proton guns, and yet to the end, with unVeeglian vitality, he was struggling to reach us with his tendrils.

Afterward he seemed dead enough, but the local wise-heads advised us to take certain precautions.

So we buried him with a steak through his heart.

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

"THE DISCOVERY OF THE INHABITED planet Nidor," we are told at the beginning of Robert Randall's THE SHROUDED PLANET (Gnome, $3), "offered the answer for which man had searched solar system after solar system during seven centuries. Conflict need not be physical; it could be the subtler conflict of two friendly yet wholly dissimilar races, living as equals, side by side—" Which seems the oddest possible opening for a novel about two almost identical races living in a situation of complete inequality.

It is, however, characteristic of the novel's indifference to matters of consistency. Nidor goes around its sun in 3,000 Earth-years; but an Earthman ages only moderately in 40 Nidorian "years" —whatever the author means by that term. The Nidorians discovered the steam engine 200 "years" ago, and have a completely unmechanized civilization. . . .

And yet, if you can read as carelessly as Randall wrote, you'll find this a surprisingly enjoyable book. Or perhaps not so surprisingly, since "Robert Randall" is Robert Silverberg and Randall Garrett, two of the brighter authors of s.f.'s youngest generation. There's some ecological ingenuity; the Nidorians are likable people, if not in the least alien; one of the episodes (the book is shaped from 3 novelets, *Astounding*, 1956) is an agreeable love story; and the whole is (up to a much too inconclusive ending) a smooth and pleasant enterprise. But *science* fiction . . .?

Tom Godwin's THE SURVIVORS (Gnome, $3) is a more satisfactorily thought-through piece of work—and a somewhat duller one. Its remote and terrifying planet of Ragnarok is well conceived and inhabited by some of the most interesting recent alien fauna; and you need stretch your credulity only slightly to believe in the successful 200-year battle for survival by an Earth colony marooned there by the heartless Gern. But two centuries of history is rather much to cover in a short novel; no sooner does a character begin to catch your interest than he dies and you find yourself reading about the next generation — so that it all becomes a dry chronicle of the deeds of faceless men. Science *fiction*. . .?

THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SLEEP

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(Lippincott, $3), published in England two years ago as ESCAPEMENT, is the fifth Charles Eric Maine novel to appear here in less than a year, and markedly the worst. If you've read any of the others, this should be warning enough.

Let's turn, somewhat more cheerfully, to fantasy, with brief notes on a number of unclassifiable items:

COME AND GO, by Manning Coles (Doubleday, $3.75). The mixture as before in Coles's spooky spoofs, with the addition of a strong dash of P. G. Wodehouse. Captivatingly frivolous spring reading.

SUMMONS FROM BAGHDAD, by Allan MacKinnon (Crime Club, $2.95). Well above average espionage thriller, brightened for fantasy readers by a strong element of genuine Gaelic second sight.

THE FOG BOAT, by Lewis Coffin and Manning Long; illustrated by Gil Miret (Lothrop, Lee & Shephard, $2.75). Juvenile worth adult attention, revivifying old myths of the sea and creating new ones—charmingly told and hauntingly illustrated.

THE GREAT ALL-STAR ANIMAL LEAGUE BALL GAME, story by Vincent Starrett, pictures by Kurt Wiese (Dodd, Mead, $2.75). Another adult-delighting juvenile, with shrewd commentary on baseball by both author and illustrator.

HAMID OF ALEPPO, by Clive King, with illustrations by Giovanetti and an introduction by Max (Macmillan, $2.50; boards, $2). Hamid is the great-grandfather of Giovanetti's hitherto incomparable Max, and quite as entrancingly humorous and odd a beast. (And this book will even tell you, at last, what kind of beast!)

FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND, edited by Forrest J. Ackerman (Central, 35¢). Because of its shape, look for this among magazines rather than books—and do look for it. The text is strained and sketchy, but the abundant still photos, from the Ackerman collection of four decades of cinemonstrosities, are magnificent.

ALWAYS COMES EVENING: the collected poems of Robert E. Howard, compiled by Glenn Lord (Arkham, $3). Howard was not (to indulge in litotes) a good poet; but these 60 poems (46 new to book-form) are interesting as footnotes to his career, and such ballads as *Solomon Kane's Homecoming* are lustily enjoyable in their own right.

THE RETURN OF CONAN, by Björn Nyberg with the collaboration of L. Sprague de Camp (Gnome, $3). This expansion of *Conan the Victorious* (*Fantastic Universe*, 1957) should please those who feel that Howard wrote far too few Conan stories—and it is probably owing to some flaw in me that I am not of their number.

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After F&SF had reprinted the dream-fantasy of The Darker Drink *(October, 1952) and the mad-scientist adventure of* The Man Who Liked Ants *(June, 1953), I wrote here: "We've now brought you the only two science-fantasy short stories in which the Saint appears; but I'm sure that a life so varied as his cannot long avoid some repetition of the, by normal standards, impossible." It's been a longish wait; but now at last the prophecy is fulfilled by this third tale of the Saint* vs. *the Impossible—a surprisingly sober and restrained (but nonetheless chilling) account of the actualities of voodoo in Haiti. Calculation from their dates of original publication seems to indicate that these strangest of his adventures befall the Saint once every eight years; let's hope—for our own sake if not for Simon Templar's—that the next comes sooner.*

The Questing Tycoon

by LESLIE CHARTERIS

IT WAS INTOLERABLY HOT IN PORT-au-Prince; for the capital city of Haiti lies at the back of a bay, a gullet twenty miles deep beyond which the opening jaws of land extend a hundred and twenty miles still farther to the west and northwest, walled in by steep high hills, and thus perfectly sheltered from every normal shift of the trade winds which temper the climate of most parts of the Antilles. The geography which made it one of the finest natural harbors in the Caribbean had doubtless appealed strongly to the French buccaneers who founded the original settlement; but three centuries later, with the wings of Pan American Airways to replace the sails of a frigate, a no less authentic pirate could be excused for being more interested in escaping from the sweltering heat pocket than in dallying to admire the anchorage.

As soon as Simon Templar had completed his errands in the town, he climbed into the jeep he had borrowed and headed back up into the hills.

Knowing what to expect of Port-au-Prince at that time of year, he had passed up the ambitious new hotels of the capital in favor of the natural air-con-

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ditioning of the Châtelet des Fleurs, an unpretentious but comfortable inn operated by an American whom he had met on a previous visit, only about fifteen miles out of the city but five thousand feet above the sea-level heat. He could feel it getting cooler as the road climbed, and in a surprisingly short time it was like being in another latitude. But the scenery did not seem to become any milder to correspond with the relief of temperature: the same brazen sun bathed rugged brownish slopes with few trees to soften their parched contours. Most of the houses he passed, whether a peasant's one-room cottage or an occasional expensive château, were built of irregular blocks of the same native stone, so that they had an air of being literally carved out of the landscape; but sometimes in a sudden valley or clinging to a distant hillside there would be a palm-thatched cabin of rough raw timbers that looked as if it had been transplanted straight from Africa. And indisputably transplanted from Africa were the straggling files of ebony people, most of them women, a few plutocrats adding their own weight to the already fantastic burdens of incredibly powerful little donkeys, but the majority laden fabulously themselves with great baskets balanced on their heads, who bustled cheerfully along the rough shoulders of the road.

He came into the little town of Pétionville, drove past the pleasant grass-lawned square dominated by the very French-looking white church, and headed on up the corkscrew highway towards Kenscoff. And six kilometers further on he met Sibao.

As he rounded one of the innumerable curves he saw a little crowd collected, much as some fascinating obstruction would create a knot in a busy string of ants. Unlike other groups that he had passed before where a few individuals from one of the ant-lines would fall out by the wayside to rest and gossip, this cluster had a focal point and an air of gravity and concern that made him think first of an automobile accident, although there was no car or truck in sight. He slowed up automatically, trying to see what it was all about as he went by, like almost any normal traveler; but when he glimpsed the unmistakable bright color of fresh blood he pulled over and stopped, which perhaps few drivers on that road would have troubled to do.

The chocolate-skinned young woman whom the others were gathered around had a six-inch gash in the calf of one leg. From the gestures and pantomime of her companions rather than the few basic French word-sounds which his ear could pick out of their

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excited jabber of Creole, he concluded that a loose stone had rolled under her foot as she walked, taking it from under her and causing her to slip sideways down off the shoulder, where another sharp pointed stone happened to stick out at exactly the right place and angle to slash her like a crude dagger. The mechanics of the accident were not really important, but it was an ugly wound, and the primitive first-aid efforts of the spectators had not been able to stanch the bleeding.

Simon saw from the tint of the blood that no artery had been cut. He made a pressure bandage with his handkerchief and two strips ripped from the tail of his shirt; but it was obvious that a few stitches would be necessary for a proper repair. He picked the girl up and carried her to the jeep.

"Nous allons chercher un médecin," he said; and he must have been understood, for there was no protest over the abduction as he turned the jeep around and headed back towards Pétionville.

The doctor whom he located was learning English and was anxious to practice it. He contrived to keep Simon around while he cleaned and sewed up and dressed the cut, and then conveniently mentioned his fee. Simon paid it, although the young woman tried to protest, and helped her back into the jeep.

His good-Samaritan gesture seemed to have become slightly harder to break off than it had been to get into; but with nothing but time on his hands he was cheerfully resigned to letting it work itself out.

"Where were you going?" he asked in French, and she pointed up the road.

"Lá-haut."

The reply was given with a curious dignity, but without presumption. He was not sure at what point he had begun to feel that she was not quite an ordinary peasant girl. She wore the same faded and formless kind of cotton dress, perhaps cleaner than some, but not cleaner than all the others, for it was not uncommon for them to be spotless. Her figure was slimmer and shapelier than most, and her features had a patrician mould that reminded him of ancient Egyptian carvings. They had remained masklike and detached throughout the ministrations of the doctor, although Simon knew that some of it must have hurt like hell.

He drove up again to the place where he had found her. Two other older women were sitting there, and they greeted her as the jeep stopped. She smiled and answered, proudly displaying the new white bandage on her leg. She started to get out.

He saw that there were three

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baskets by the roadside where the two women had waited. He stopped her, and said: "You should not walk far today, especially with a load. I can take you all the way."

"Vous êtes très gentil."

She spoke French very stiffly and shyly and correctly, like a child remembering lessons. Then she spoke fluently to the other women in Creole, and they hoisted the third basket between them and put it in the back of the jeep. Her shoes were still on top of its miscellany of fruits and vegetables, according to the custom of the country, which regards shoes as too valuable to be worn out with mere tramping from place to place, especially over rough rocky paths.

Simon drove all the way to the Châtelet des Fleurs, where the road seems to end, but she pointed ahead and said: *"Plus loin."*

He drove on around the inn. Not very far beyond it the pavement ended, but a navigable trail meandered on still further and higher towards the background peaks. He expected it to become impassable at every turn, but it teased him on for several minutes and still hadn't petered out when a house suddenly came in sight, built out of rock and perched like a fragment of a medieval castle on a promontory a little above them. A rutted driveway branched off and slanted up to it, and the young woman pointed again.

"La maison-là."

It was not a mansion in size, but on the other hand it was certainly no native peasant's cottage.

"Merci beaucoup," she said in her stilted schoolgirl French, as the jeep stopped in front of it.

"De rien," he murmured amiably, and went around to lift out the heavy basket.

A man came out on to the verandah, and she spoke rapidly in Creole, obviously explaining about her accident and how she came to be chauffeured to the door. As Simon looked up, the man came down to meet him, holding out his hand.

"Please don't bother with that," he said. "I've got a handy man who'll take care of it. You've done enough for Sibao already. Won't you come in and have a drink? My name's Theron Netlord."

Simon Templar could not help looking a little surprised. For Mr. Netlord was not only a white man, but he was unmistakably an American; and Simon had some vague recollection of his name.

II

It can be assumed that the birth of the girl who was later to be called Sibao took place under the very best auspices, for her father

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was the *houngan* of an *houmfort* in a valley that could be seen from the house where Simon had taken her, which in terms of a more familiar religion than voodoo would be the equivalent of the vicar of a parish church; and her mother was not only a *mambo* in her own right, but also an occasional communicant of the church in Pétionville. But after the elaborate precautionary rituals with which her birth was surrounded, the child grew up just like any of the other naked children of the hills, until she was nearly seven.

At that time, she woke up one morning and said: "Mama, I saw Uncle Zande trying to fly, but he dived into the ground."

Her mother thought nothing of this until the evening, when word came that Uncle Zande, who was laying tile on the roof of a building in Léogane, had stumbled off it and broken his neck. After that much attention was paid to her dreams, but the things that they prophesied were not always so easy to interpret until after they happened.

Two years later her grandfather fell sick with a burning fever, and his children and grandchildren gathered around to see him die. But the young girl went to him and caressed his forehead, and at that moment the sweating and shivering stopped, and the fever left him and he began to mend. After that there were others who asked for her touch, and many of them affirmed that they experienced extraordinary relief.

At least it was evident that she was entitled to admission to the *houmfort* without further probation. One night, with a red bandanna on her head and gay handkerchiefs knotted around her neck and arms, with a bouquet in one hand and a crucifix in the other, she sat in a chair between her four sponsors and watched the *hounsis-canzo,* the student priests, dance before her. Then her father took her by the hand to the President of the congregation, and she recited her first voodoo oath:

"*Je jure, je jure,* I swear, to respect the powers of the *mystères de Guinée,* to respect the powers of the *houngan,* of the President of the Society, and the powers of all those on whom these powers are conferred."

And after she had made all her salutations and prostrations, and had herself been raised shoulder high and applauded, they withdrew and left her before the altar to receive whatever revelation the spirits might vouchsafe to her.

At thirteen she was a young woman, long-legged and comely, with a proud yet supple walk and prematurely steady eyes that gazed so gravely at those whom she noticed that they seemed never to rest on a person's face but to look through into the thoughts behind it. She went

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faithfully to school and learned what she was told to, including a smattering of the absurdly involved and illogical version of her native tongue which they called "French"; but when her father stated that her energy could be better devoted to helping to feed the family, she ended her formal education without complaint.

There were three young men who watched her one evening as she picked pigeon peas among the bushes that her father had planted, and who were more interested by the grace of her body than by any tales they may have heard of her supernatural gifts. As the brief mountain twilight darkened they came to seize her; but she knew what was in their minds, and ran. As the one penitent survivor told it, a cloud suddenly swallowed her: they blundered after her in the fog, following the sounds of her flight: then they saw her shadow almost within reach, and leapt to the capture, but the ground vanished from under their feet. The bodies of two of them were found at the foot of the precipice; and the third lived, though with a broken back, only because a tree caught him on the way down.

Her father knew then that she was more than qualified to become an *hounsis-canzo,* and she told him that she was ready. He took her to the *houmfort* and set in motion the elaborate seven-day ritual of purification and initiation, instructing her in all the mysteries himself. For her *loa,* or personal patron deity, she had chosen Erzulie; and in the baptismal ceremony of the fifth day she received the name of Sibao, the mystic mountain ridge where Erzulie mates with the Supreme Gods, the legendary place of eternal love and fertility. And when the *houngan* made the invocation, the goddess showed her favor by possessing Sibao, who uttered prophecies and admonitions in a language that only *houngans* can interpret, and with the hands and mouth of Sibao accepted and ate of the sacrificial white pigeons and white rice; and the *houngan* was filled with pride as he chanted:

"Les Saints mandés mangés.
Genoux-terre!
Parce que gnou loa nan
govi pas capab mangé,
Ou gaingnin pour mangé
pour li!"

Thereafter she hoed the patches of vegetables that her father cultivated as before, and helped to grate manioc, and carried water from the spring, and went back and forth to market, like all the other young women; but the tale of her powers grew slowly and surely, and it would have been a reckless man who dared to molest her.

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Then Theron Netlord came to Kenscoff, and presently heard of her through the inquiries that he made. He sent word that he would like her to work in his house; and because he offered wages that would much more than pay for a substitute to do her work at home, she accepted. She was then seventeen.

"A rather remarkable girl," said Netlord, who had told Simon some of these things. "Believe me, to some of the people around here, she's almost like a living saint."

Simon just managed not to blink at the word.

"Won't that accident this afternoon shake her pedestal a bit?" he asked.

"Does a bishop lose face if he trips over something and breaks a leg?" Netlord retorted. "Besides, *you* happened. Just when she needed help, you drove by, picked her up, took her to the doctor, and then brought her here. What would you say were the odds against her being so lucky? And then tell me why it doesn't still look as if *something* was taking special care of her!"

He was a big thick-shouldered man who looked as forceful as the way he talked. He had iron-gray hair and metallic gray eyes, a blunt nose, a square thrusting jaw, and the kind of lips that even look muscular. You had an inevitable impression of him at the first glance; and without hesitation you would have guessed him to be a man who had reached the top ranks of some competitive business, and who had bulled his way up there with ruthless disregard for whatever obstructions might have to be trodden down or jostled aside. And trite as the physiognomy must seem, in this instance you would have been absolutely right.

Theron Netlord had made a fortune from the manufacture of bargain-priced lingerie.

The incongruity of this will only amuse those who know little about the clothing industry. It would be natural for the uninitiated to think of the trade in fragile feminine frotheries as being carried on by fragile, feminine and frothy types, but in fact, at the wholesale manufacturing level it is as tough and cut-throat a business as any legitimate operation in the modern world. And even in a business which has always been somewhat notorious for lack of tenderness towards its employees, Mr. Netlord had been a perennial source of ammunition for socialistic agitators. His long-standing vendetta against organized labor was an epic of its kind; and he had been named in one Congressional investigation as the man who, with a combination of gangster tactics and an icepick eye for loopholes in union contracts and govern-

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ment regulations, had come closest in the last decade to running an oldfashioned sweatshop. It was from casually remembered references to such things in the newspapers that Simon had identified the name.

"Do you live here permanently?" Simon asked in a conversational way.

"I've been here for a while, and I'm staying a while," Netlord answered equivocally. "I like the rum. How do you like it?"

"It's strictly ambrosial."

"You can get fine rum in the States, like that Lemon Hart from Jamaica, but you have to come here to drink Barbancourt. They don't make enough to export."

"I can think of worse reasons for coming here. But I might want something more to hold me indefinitely."

Netlord chuckled.

"Of course you would. I was kidding. So do I. I'll never retire. I *like* being in business. It's my sport, my hobby, and my recreation. I've spent more than a year all around the Caribbean, having what everyone would say was a nice long vacation. Nuts. My mind hasn't been off business for a single day."

"They tell me there's a great future in the area."

"And I'm looking for the future. There's none left in America. At the bottom, you've got your employees demanding more wages and pension funds for less work every year. At the top, you've got a damned paternalistic Government taxing your profits to the bone to pay for all its utopian projects at home and abroad. The man who's trying to literally mind his own business is in the middle, in a squeeze that wrings all the incentive out of him. I'm sick of bucking that set-up."

"What's wrong with Puerto Rico? You can get a tax exemption there if you bring in an employing industry."

"Sure. But the Puerto Ricans are getting spoiled, and the cost of labor is shooting up. In a few more years they'll have it as expensive and as organized as it is back home."

"So you're investigating Haiti because the labor is cheaper?"

"It's still so cheap that you could starve to death trying to sell machinery. Go visit one of the factories where they're making wooden salad bowls, for instance. The only power tool they use is a lathe. And where does the power come from? From a man who spends the whole day cranking a big wheel. Why? Because all he costs is one dollar a day—and that's cheaper than you can operate a motor, let alone amortizing the initial cost of it!"

"Then what's the catch?"

"This being a foreign country: your product hits a tariff wall when you try to import it into the

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States, and the duty will knock you silly."

"Things are tough all over," Simon remarked sympathetically.

The other's sinewy lips flexed in a tight grin.

"Any problem is tough till you lick it. Coming here showed me how to lick this one—but you'd never guess how!"

"I give up."

"I'm sorry, I'm not telling. May I fix your drink?"

Simon glanced at his watch and shook his head.

"Thanks, but I should be on my way." He put down his glass and stood up. "I'm glad I needn't worry about you getting ulcers, though."

Netlord laughed comfortably, and walked with him out on to the front verandah.

"I hope getting Sibao back here didn't bring you too far out of your way."

"No, I'm staying just a little below you, at the Châtelet des Fleurs."

"Then we'll probably run into each other." Netlord put out his hand. "It was nice talking to you, Mr.——"

"Templar. Simon Templar."

The big man's powerful grip held on to Simon's.

"You're not—by any chance—that fellow they call the Saint?"

"Yes." The Saint smiled. "But I'm just a tourist."

He disengaged himself pleasantly; but as he went down the steps he could feel Netlord's eyes on his back, and remembered that for one instant he had seen in them the kind of fear from which murder is born.

III

In telling so many stories of Simon Templar, the chronicler runs a risk of becoming unduly preoccupied with the reactions of various characters to the discovery that they have met the Saint, and it may fairly be observed that there is a definite limit to the possible variety of these responses. One of the most obvious of them was the shock to a guilty conscience which could open a momentary crack in an otherwise impenetrable mask. Yet in this case it was of vital importance.

If Theron Netlord had not betrayed himself for that fleeting second, and the Saint had not been sharply aware of it, Simon might have quickly dismissed the panty potentate from his mind; and then there might have been no story to tell at all.

Instead of which, Simon only waited to make more inquiries about Mr. Netlord until he was able to corner his host, Atherton Lee, alone in the bar that night.

He had an easy gambit by casually relating the incident of Sibao.

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"Theron Netlord? Oh, yes, I know him," Lee said. "He stayed here for a while before he rented that house up on the hill. He still drops in sometimes for a drink and a yarn."

"One of the original rugged individualists, isn't he?" Simon remarked.

"Did he give you his big tirade about wages and taxes?"

"I got the synopsis, anyway."

"Yes, he's a personality all right. At least he doesn't make any bones about where he stands. What beats me is how a fellow of that type could get all wrapped up in voodoo."

Simon did not actually choke and splutter over his drink because he was not given to such demonstrations; but he felt as close to it as he was ever likely to.

"He what?"

"Didn't he get on to that subject? I guess you didn't stay very long."

"Only for one drink."

"He's really sold on it. That's how he originally came up here. He'd seen the voodoo dances they put on in the tourist spots down in Port-au-Prince, but he knew they were just a night-club show. He was looking for the McCoy. Well, we sent the word around, as we do sometimes for guests who're interested, and a bunch from around here came up and put on a show in the patio. They don't do any of the real sacred ceremonies, of course, but they're a lot more authentic than the professionals in town. Netlord lapped it up; but it was just an appetizer to him. He wanted to get right into the fraternity and find out what it was all about."

"What for?"

"He said he was thinking of writing a book about it. But half the time he talks as if he really believed in it. He says that the trouble with Western civilization is that it's too practical—it's never had enough time to develop its spiritual potential."

"Are you pulling my leg or is he pulling yours?"

"I'm not kidding. He rented that house, anyway, and set out to get himself accepted by the natives. He took lessons in Creole so that he could talk to them, and he speaks it a hell of a lot better than I do—and I've lived here a hell of a long time. He hired that girl Sibao just because she's the daughter of the local *houngan,* and she's been instructing him and sponsoring him for the *houmfort.* It's all very serious and legitimate. He told me some time ago that he'd been initiated as a junior member, or whatever they call it, but he's planning to take the full course and become a graduate witch-doctor."

"Can he do that? I mean, can a white man qualify?"

"Haitians are very broad-minded," Atherton Lee said

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gently. "There's no color bar here."

Simon broodingly chain-lighted another cigarette.

"He must be dreaming up something new and frightful for the underwear market," he murmured. "Maybe he's planning to top those perfumes that are supposed to contain mysterious smells that drive the male sniffer mad with desire. Next season he'll come out with a negligee with a genuine voodoo spell woven in, guaranteed to give the matron of a girls' reformatory more sex appeal than Cleopatra."

But the strange combination of fear and menace that he had caught in Theron Netlord's eyes came back to him with added vividness, and he knew that a puzzle confronted him that could not be dismissed with any amusing flippancy. There had to be a true answer, and it had to be of unimaginable ugliness: therefore he had to find it, or he would be haunted for ever after by the thought of the evil he might have prevented.

To find the answer, however, was much easier to resolve than to do. He wrestled with it for half the night, pacing up and down his room; but when he finally gave up and lay down to sleep, he had to admit that his brain had only carried him around in as many circles as his feet, and gotten him just as close to nowhere.

In the morning, as he was about to leave his room, something white on the floor caught his eye. It was an envelope that had been slipped under the door. He picked it up. It was sealed, but there was no writing on it. It was stiff to his touch, as if it contained some kind of card, but it was curiously heavy.

He opened it. Folded in a sheet of paper was a piece of thin bright metal, about three inches by two, which looked as if it might have been cut from an ordinary tin can, flattened out and with the edges neatly turned under so that they would not be sharp. On it had been hammered an intricate symmetrical design.

Basically, a heart. The inside of the heart filled with a precise network of vertical and horizontal lines, with a single dot in the center of each little square that they formed. The outline of the heart trimmed with a regularly scalloped edge, like a doily, with a similar dot in each of the scallops. Impaled on a mast rising from the upper V of the heart, a crest like an ornate letter M, with a star above and below it. Two curlicues like skeletal wings swooping out, one from each shoulder of the heart, and two smaller curlicues tufting from the bottom point of the heart, on either side of another sort of vertical mast projecting down from the point and ending in another

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star—like an infinitely stylized and painstaking doodle.

On the paper that wrapped it was written, in a careful childish script:

Pour vous protéger.
Merci.
Sibao

Simon went on down to the dining room and found Atherton Lee having breakfast.

"This isn't Valentine's Day in Haiti, is it?" asked the Saint.

Lee shook his head.

"Or anywhere else that I know of. That's sometime in February."

"Well, anyhow, I got a valentine."

Simon showed him the rectangle of embossed metal.

"It's native work," Lee said. "But what is it?"

"That's what I thought you could tell me."

"I never saw anything quite like it."

The waiter was bringing Simon a glass of orange juice. He stood frozen in the act of putting it down, his eyes fixed on the piece of tin and widening slowly. The glass rattled on his service plate.

Lee glanced up at him.

"Do you know what it is?"

"*Vêver,*" the man said.

He put the orange juice down and stepped back, still staring.

Simon did not know the word. He looked inquiringly at his host, who shrugged helplessly and handed the token back.

"What's that?"

"*Vêver,*" said the waiter. "Of Maîtresse Erzulie."

"Erzulie is the top voodoo goddess," Lee explained. "I guess that's her symbol, or some sort of charm."

"If you get good way, very good," said the waiter obscurely. "If you no should have, very bad."

"I believe I dig you, Alphonse," said the Saint. "And you don't have to worry about me. I got it the good way." He showed Lee the paper that had enclosed it. "It was slid under my door sometime this morning. I guess coming from her makes it pretty special."

"Congratulations," Lee said. "I'm glad you're officially protected. Is there anything you particularly need to be protected from?"

Simon dropped the little plaque into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"First off, I'd like to be protected from the heat of Port-au-Prince. I'm afraid I've got to go back down there. May I borrow the jeep again?"

"Of course. But we can send down for anything you want."

"I hardly think they'd let you bring back the Public Library," said the Saint. "I'm going to wade through everything they've got on the subject of voodoo. No, I'm not going to take it up like Netlord. But I'm just crazy enough myself to lie awake wondering what's in it for him."

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He found plenty of material to study—so much, in fact, that instead of being frustrated by a paucity of information he was almost discouraged by its abundance. He had assumed, like any average man, that voodoo was a primitive cult that would have a correspondingly simple theology and ritual: he soon discovered that it was astonishingly complex and formalized. Obviously he wasn't going to master it all in one short day's study. However, that wasn't necessarily the objective. He didn't have to write a thesis on it, or even pass an examination. He was only looking for something, anything, that would give him a clue to what Theron Netlord was seeking.

He browsed through books until one o'clock, went out to lunch, and returned to read some more. The trouble was that he didn't know what he was looking for. All he could do was expose himself to as many ideas as possible, and hope that the same one would catch his attention as must have caught Netlord's.

And when the answer did strike him, it was so far-fetched and monstrous that he could not believe he was on the right track. He thought it would make an interesting plot for a story, but could not accept it for himself. He felt an exasperating lack of accomplishment when the library closed for the day and he had to drive back up again to Kenscoff.

He headed straight for the bar of the Châtelet des Fleurs and the long relaxing drink that he had looked forward to all the way up. The waiter, who was on duty brought him a note with his drink.

Dear Mr. Templar,

I'm sorry your visit yesterday had to be so short. If it wouldn't bore you too much, I should enjoy another meeting. Could you come to dinner tonight? Just send word by the bearer.

Sincerely,
Theron Netlord

Simon glanced up.

"Is someone still waiting for an answer?"

"Yes, sir, Outside."

The Saint pulled out his pen and scribbled at the foot of the note:

Thanks. I'll be with you about 7.

S.T.

He decided, practically in the same instant in which the irresponsible impulse occurred to him, against signing himself with the little haloed stick figure which he had made famous. As he handed the note back to the waiter he reflected that, in the circumstances, his mere acceptance was bravado enough.

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IV

There were drums beating somewhere in the hills, faint and far-off, calling and answering each other from different directions, their sound wandering and echoing through the night so that it was impossible ever to be certain just where a particular tattoo had come from. It reached inside Netlord's house as a kind of vague vibration, like the endless thin chorus of nocturnal insects, which was so persistent that the ear learned to filter it out and for long stretches would be quite deaf to it, and then, in a lull in the conversation, with an infinitesimal retuning of attention, it would come back in a startling crescendo.

Theron Netlord caught the Saint listening at one of those moments, and said, "They're having a *brûler zin* tonight."

"What's that?"

"The big voodoo festive ceremony which climaxes most of the special rites. Dancing, litanies, invocation, possession by *loas,* more dances, sacrifice, more invocations and possessions, more dancing. It won't begin until much later. Right now they're just telling each other about it, warming up and getting in the mood."

Simon had been there for more than an hour, and this was the first time there had been any mention of voodoo.

Netlord had made himself a good if somewhat overpowering host. He mixed excellent rum cocktails, but without offering his guest the choice of anything else. He made stimulating conversation, salted with recurrent gibes at bureaucratic government and the Welfare State, but he held the floor so energetically that it was almost impossible to take advantage of the provocative openings he offered.

Simon had not seen Sibao again. Netlord had opened the door himself, and the cocktail makings were already on a side table in the living room. There had been subdued rustlings and clinkings behind a screen that almost closed a dark alcove at the far end of the room, but no servant announced dinner: presently Netlord had announced it himself and led the way around the screen and switched on a light, revealing a damask-covered table set for two and burdened additionally with chafing dishes, from which he himself served rice, asparagus, and a savory chicken stew rather like *coq au vin.* It was during one of the dialogue breaks induced by eating that Netlord had caught Simon listening to the drums.

"*Brûler* — that means 'burn,'" said the Saint. "But what is *zin?*"

"The *zin* is a special earthenware pot. It stands on a tripod, and a fire is lighted under it. The *mambo* kills a sacrificial chicken by sticking her finger down into

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its mouth and tearing its throat open." Netlord took a hearty mouthful of stew. "She sprinkles blood and feathers in various places, and the plucked hens go into the pot with some corn. There's a chant:

"Hounsis là yo, levez, nous domi trope:
Hounsis là yo; levez, pour nous laver yeux nous:
Gadé qui l'heu li yé."

Later on she serves the boiling food right into the bare hands of the *hounsis.* Sometimes they put their bare feet in the flames too. It doesn't hurt them. The pots are left on the fire till they get red hot and crack, and everyone shouts *'Zin yo craqués!'* "

"It sounds like a big moment," said the Saint gravely. "If I could understand half of it."

"You mean you didn't get very far with your researches today?"

Simon felt the involuntary contraction of his stomach muscles, but he was able to control his hands so that there was no check in the smooth flow of what he was doing.

"How did you know about my researches?" he asked, as if he were only amused to have them mentioned.

"I dropped in to see Atherton Lee this morning, and asked after you. He told me where you'd gone. He said he'd told you about my interest in voodoo, and he supposed you were getting primed for an argument. I must admit, that encouraged me to hope you'd accept my invitation tonight."

The Saint thought that that might well qualify among the great understatements of the decade, but he did not let himself show it. After their first reflex leap his pulses ran like cool clockwork.

"I didn't find out too much," he said, "except that voodoo is a lot more complicated than I imagined. I thought it was just a few primitive superstitions that the slaves brought with them from Africa."

"Of course, some of it came from Dahomey. But how did it get there? The voodoo story of the Creation ties up with the myths of ancient Egypt. The Basin of Damballah—that's a sort of font at the foot of a voodoo altar—is obviously related to the blood trough at the foot of a Mayan altar. Their magic uses the Pentacle—the same mystic figure that medieval European magicians believed in. If you know anything about it, you can find links with eighteenth-century Masonry in some of their rituals, and even the design of the *vêvers*——"

"Those are the sacred drawings that are supposed to summon the gods to take possession of their devotees, aren't they? I read about them."

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"Yes, when the *houngan* draws them by dripping ashes and corn meal from his fingers, with the proper invocation. And doesn't that remind you of the sacred sand paintings of the Navajos? Do you see how all those roots must go back to a common source that's older than any written history?"

Netlord stared at the Saint challengingly, in one of those rare pauses where he waited for an answer.

Simon's fingertips touched the hard shape of the little tin plaque that was still in his shirt pocket, but he decided against showing it, and again he checked the bet.

"I saw a drawing of the *vêver* of Erzulie in a book," he said. "Somehow it made me think of Catholic symbols connected with the Virgin Mary—with the heart, the stars, and the 'M' over it."

"Why not? Voodoo is pantheistic. The Church is against voodoo, not voodoo against the Church. Part of the purification prescribed for anyone who's being initiated as a *hounsis-canzo* is to go to church and make confession. Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are regarded as powerful intermediaries to the highest gods. Part of the litany they'll chant tonight at the *brûler zin* goes: *Grâce, Marie, grâce, Marie grâce, grâce, Marie grâce, Jésus, pardonnez-nous!*"

"Seriously?"

"The invocation of Legbas Atibon calls on St Anthony of Padua: *Par pouvoir St-Antoine de Padoue.* And take the invocation of my own patron, Ogoun Feraille. It begins: *Par pouvoir St-Jacques Majeur . . .*"

"Isn't that blasphemy?" said the Saint. "I mean, a kind of deliberate sacrilege, like they're supposed to use in a Black Mass, to win the favor of devils by defiling something holy?"

Netlord's fist crashed on the table like a thunderclap.

"No, it isn't! The truth can't be blasphemous. Sacrilege is a sin invented by bigots to try to keep God under contract to their own exclusive club. As if supernatural facts could be alerted by human name-calling! There are a hundred sects all claiming to be the only true Christianity, and Christianity is only one of thousands of religions, all claiming to have the only genuine divine revelation. But the real truth is bigger than any one of them and includes them all!"

"I'm sorry," said the Saint. "I forgot that you were a convert."

"Lee told you that, of course. I don't deny it." The metallic gray eyes probed the Saint like knives. "I suppose you think I'm crazy."

"I'd rather say I was puzzled."

"Because you wouldn't expect a man like me to have any time for mysticism."

"Maybe."

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Netlord poured some more wine.

"That's where you show your own limitations. The whole trouble with Western civilization is that it's blind in one eye. It doesn't believe in anything that can't be weighed and measured or reduced to a mathematical or chemical formula. It thinks it knows all the answers because it invented airplanes and television and hydrogen bombs. It thinks other cultures were backward because they fooled around with levitation and telepathy and raising the dead instead of killing the living. Well, some mighty clever people were living in Asia and Africa and Central America, thousands of years before Europeans crawled out of their caves. What makes you so sure that they didn't discover things that you don't understand?"

"I'm not so sure, but—"

"Do you know why I got ahead of everybody else in business? Because I never wore a blinker over one eye. If anyone said he could do anything, I never said 'That's impossible.' I said 'Show me how.' I don't care who I learn from, a college professor or a ditch-digger, a Chinaman or a nigger—so long as I can use what he knows."

The Saint finished eating and picked up his glass.

"And you think you'll find something in voodoo you can use?"

"I have found it. Do you know what it is?"

Simon waited to be told, but apparently it was not another of Netlord's rhetorical questions. When it was clear that a reply was expected, he said: "Why should I?"

"That's what you were trying to find out at the Public Library."

"I suppose I can admit that," Simon said mildly. "I'm a seeker for knowledge, too."

"I was afraid you would be, Templar, as soon as I heard your name. Not knowing who you were, I'd talked a little too much last night. It wouldn't have mattered with anyone else, but as the Saint you'd be curious about me. You'd have to ask questions. Lee would tell you about my interest in voodoo. Then you'd try to find out what I could use voodoo for. I knew all that when I asked you to come here tonight."

"And I knew you knew all that when I accepted."

"Put your cards on the table, then. What did your reading tell you?"

Simon felt unwontedly stupid. Perhaps because he had let Netlord do most of the talking, he must have done more than his own share of eating and drinking. Now it was an effort to keep up the verbal swordplay.

"It wasn't too much help," he said. "The mythology of voodoo was quite fascinating, but I

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couldn't see a guy like you getting a large charge out of spiritual trimmings. You'd want something that meant power, or money, or both. And the books I got hold of today didn't have much factual material about the darker side of voodoo—the angles that I've seen played up in lurid fiction."

"Don't stop now."

The Saint felt as if he lifted a slender blade once more against a remorseless bludgeon.

"Of course," he said, and meant to say it lightly, "you might really have union and government trouble if it got out that Netlord Underwear was being made by American zombies."

"So you guessed it," Netlord said.

v

Simon Templar stared.

He had a sensation of utter unreality, as if at some point he had slipped from wakeful life into a nightmare without being aware of the moment when he fell asleep. A separate part of his brain seemed to hear his own voice at a distance.

"You really believe in zombies?"

"That isn't a matter of belief. I've seen them. A zombie prepared and served this dinner. That's why he was ordered not to let you see him."

"Now I really need the cliché: this I have got to see!"

"I'm afraid he's left for the night," Netlord said matter-of-factly.

"But you know how to make 'em?"

"Not yet. He belongs to the *houngan*. But I shall know before the sun comes up tomorrow. In a little while I shall go down to the *houmfort*, and the *houngan* will admit me to the last mysteries. The *brûler zin* afterwards is to celebrate that."

"Congratulations. What did you have to do to rate this?"

"I've promised to marry his daughter, Sibao."

Simon felt as if he had passed beyond the capacity for surprise. A soft blanket of cotton wool was folding around his mind.

"Do you mean that?"

"Don't be absurd. As soon as I know all I need to, I can do without both of them."

"But suppose they resent that."

"Let me tell you something. Voodoo is a very practical kind of insurance. When a member is properly initiated, certain parts of a sacrifice and certain things from his body go into a little urn called the *pot de tête*, and after that the vulnerable element of his soul stays in the urn, which stays in the *houmfort*."

"Just like a safe deposit."

"And so, no one can lay an evil spell on him."

"Unless they can get hold of his *pot de tête*."

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"So you see how easily I can destroy them if I act first."

The Saint moved his head as if to shake and clear it. It was like trying to shake a ton weight.

"It's very good of you to tell me all this," he articulated mechanically. "But what makes you so confidential?"

"I had to know how you'd respond to my idea when you knew it. Now you must tell me, truthfully."

"I think it stinks."

"Suppose you knew that I had creatures working for me, in a factory—zombies, who'd give me back all the money they'd nominally have to earn, except the bare minimum required for food and lodging. What would you do?"

"Report it to some authority that could stop you."

"That mightn't be so easy. A court that didn't believe in zombies couldn't stop people voluntarily giving me money."

"In that case," Simon answered deliberately, "I might just have to kill you."

Netlord sighed heavily.

"I expected that too," he said. "I only wanted to be sure. That's why I took steps in advance to be able to control you."

The Saint had known it for some indefinite time. He was conscious of his body sitting in a chair, but it did not seem to belong to him.

"You bastard," he said. "So you managed to feed me some kind of dope. But you're really crazy if you think that'll help you."

Theron Netlord put a hand in his coat pocket and took out a small automatic. He leveled it at the Saint's chest, resting his forearm on the table.

"It's very simple," he said calmly. "I could kill you now, and easily account for your disappearance. But I like the idea of having you work for me. As a zombie, you could retain many of your unusual abilities. So I could kill you, and, after I've learned a little more tonight, restore you to living death. But that would impair your usefulness in certain ways. So I'd rather apply what I know already, if I can, and make you my creature without harming you physically."

"That's certainly considerate of you," Simon scoffed.

He didn't know what unquenchable spark of defiance gave him the will to keep up the hopeless bluff. He seemed to have no contact with any muscles below his neck. But as long as he didn't try to move, and fail, Netlord couldn't be sure of that.

"The drug is only to relax you," Netlord said. "Now look at this."

He dipped his left hand in the ashtray beside him, and quickly began drawing a pattern with his fingertips on the white table-

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cloth—a design of crisscross diagonal lines with other vertical lines rising through the diamonds they formed, the verticals tipped with stars and curlicues, more than anything like the picture of an ornate wrought-iron gate. And as he drew it he intoned in a strange chanting voice:

"Par pouvoir St-Jacques Majeur, Ogoun Badagris nèg Baguidi, Bago, Ogoun Feraille nèg fer, nèg feraille, nèg tagnifer nago, Ogoun batala, nèg, nèg Ossagne malor, ossangne aquiquan, Ossange agouelingui, Jupiter tonnerre, nèg blabla, nèg oloncoun, nèg vantè-m pas fie'm. . . . Aocher nago, aocher nago, aocher nago!"

The voice had risen, ending on a kind of muted shout, and there was a blaze of fanatic excitement in Netlord's dilated eyes.

Simon wanted to laugh. He said: "What's that—a sequel to the Hutsut Song?" Or he said: "I prefer *''Twas brillig and the slithy toves.'*" Or perhaps he said neither, for the thoughts and the ludicrousness and the laugh were suddenly chilled and empty, and it was like a hollowness and a darkness, like stepping into nothingness and a quicksand opening under his feet, sucking him down, only it was the mind that went down, the lines of the wrought-iron gate pattern shimmering and blinding before his eyes, and a black horror such as he had never known rising around him.

Out of some untouched reserve of will power he wrung the strength to clear his vision again for a moment, and to shape words that he knew came out, even though they came through stiff clumsy lips.

"Then I'll have to kill you right now," he said.

He tried to get up. He had to try now. He couldn't pretend any longer that he was immobile from choice. His limbs felt like lead. His body was encased in invisible concrete. The triumphant fascinated face of Theron Netlord blurred in his sight.

The commands of his brain went out along nerves that swallowed them in enveloping numbness. His mind was drowning in the swelling dreadful dark. He thought: "Sibao, your Maîtresse Erzulie must be the weak sister in this league."

And suddenly, he moved.

As if taut wires had snapped, he moved. He was on his feet. Uncertainly, like a thawing out, like a painful return of circulation, he felt connections with his body linking up again. He saw the exultation in Netlord's face crumple into rage and incredulous terror.

"Fooled you, didn't I?" said the Saint croakily. "You must still need some coaching on your hex technique."

Netlord moved his hand a little, rather carefully, and his

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knuckle whitened on the trigger of the automatic. The range was point-blank.

Simon's eardrums rang with the shot, and something struck him a stunning blinding blow over the heart. He had an impression of being hurled backwards as if by the blow of a giant fist; and then with no recollection of falling he knew that he was lying on the floor, half under the table, and he had no strength to move any more.

VI

Theron Netlord rose from his chair and looked down, shaken by the pounding of his own heart. He had done many brutal things in his life, but he had never killed anyone before. It had been surprisingly easy to do, and he had been quite deliberate about it. It was only afterwards that the shock shook him, with his first understanding of the new loneliness into which he had irrevocably stepped, the apartness from all other men that only murderers know.

Then a whisper and a stir of movement caught his eye and ear together, and he turned his head and saw Sibao. She wore the white dress and the white handkerchief on her head, and the necklaces of threaded seeds and grain, that were prescribed for the ceremony that night.

"What are you doing here?" he snarled in Creole. "I said I would meet you at the *houmfort*."

"I felt there was need for me."

She knelt by the Saint, touching him with her sensitive hands. Netlord put the gun in his pocket and turned to the sideboard. He uncorked a bottle of rum, poured some into a glass, and drank.

Sibao stood before him again.

"Why did you want to kill him?"

"He was—he was a bad man. A thief."

"He was good."

"No, he was clever." Netlord had had no time to prepare for questions. He was improvising wildly, aware of the hollowness of his invention and trying to bolster it with truculence. "He must have been waiting for a chance to meet you. If that had not happened, he would have found another way. He came to rob me."

"What could he steal?"

Netlord pulled out his wallet, and took from it a thick pad of currency. He showed it to her.

"He knew that I had this. He would have killed me for it." There were twenty-five crisp hundred-dollar bills, an incredible fortune by the standards of a Haitian peasant, but only the amount of pocket money that Netlord normally carried and would have felt undressed without. The girl's dark velvet eyes

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rested on it, and he was quick to see more possibilities. "It was a present I was going to give to you and your father tonight." Money was the strongest argument he had ever known. He went on with new-found confidence: "Here, take it now."

She held the money submissively.

"But what about—him?"

"We must not risk trouble with the police. Later we will take care of him, in our own way. . . . But we must go now, or we shall be late."

He took her compellingly by the arm, but for a moment she still held back.

"You know that when you enter the *sobagui* to be cleansed, your *loa,* who sees all things, will know if there is any untruth in your heart."

"I have nothing to fear." He was sure of it now. There was nothing in voodoo that scared him. It was simply a craft that he had set out to master, as he had mastered everything else that he made up his mind to. He would use it on others, but it could do nothing to him. "Come along, they are waiting for us."

Simon heard their voices before the last extinguishing wave of darkness rolled over him.

VII

He woke up with a start, feeling cramped and bruised from lying on the floor. Memory came back to him in full flood as he sat up. He looked down at his shirt. There was a black-rimmed hole in it, and even a gray scorch of powder around that. But when he examined his chest, there was no hole and no blood, only a pronounced soreness over the ribs. From his breast pocket he drew out the metal plaque with the *vêver* of Erzulie. The bullet had scarred and bent it, but it had struck at an angle and glanced off without even scratching him, tearing another hole in the shirt under his arm.

The Saint gazed at the twisted piece of tin with an uncanny tingle feathering his spine.

Sibao must have known he was unhurt when she touched him. Yet she seemed to have kept the knowledge to herself. Why?

He hoisted himself experimentally to his feet. He knew that he had first been drugged, then over that lowered resistance almost completely mesmerized; coming on top of that, the deadened impact of the bullet must have knocked him out, as a punch over the heart could knock out an already groggy boxer. But now all the effects seemed to have worn off together, leaving only a tender spot on his chest and an insignificant muzziness in his head. By his watch, he had been out for about two hours.

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The house was full of the silence of emptiness. He went through a door to the kitchen, ran some water, and bathed his face. The only other sound there was the ticking of a cheap clock.

Netlord had said that only the two of them were in the house. And Netlord had gone—with Sibao.

Gone to something that everything in the Saint's philosophy must refuse to believe. But things had happened to himself already that night which he could only think of incredulously. And incredulity would not alter them, or make them less true.

He went back through the living room and out on to the front verandah. Ridge beyond ridge, the mysterious hills fell away from before him under a full yellow moon that dimmed the stars; and there was no jeep in the driveway at his feet.

The drums still pulsed through the night, but they were no longer scattered. They were gathered together, blending in unison and counterpoint, but the acoustical tricks of the mountains still masked their location. Their muttering swelled and receded with chance shifts of air, and the echoes of it came from all around the horizon, so that the whole world seemed to throb softly with it.

There was plenty of light for him to walk down to the Châtelet des Fleurs.

He found Atherton Lee and the waiter starting to put out the lights in the bar. The innkeeper looked at him in a rather startled way.

"Why—what happened?" Lee asked.

Simon sat up at the counter and lighted a cigarette.

"Pour me a Barbancourt," he said defensively, "and tell me why you think anything happened."

"Netlord brought the jeep back. He told me he'd taken you to the airport—you'd had some news which made you suddenly decide to catch the night plane to Miami, and you just had time to make it. He was coming back tomorrow to pick up your things and send them after you."

"Oh, that," said the Saint blandly. "When the plane came through, it turned out to have filled up at Ciudad Trujillo. I couldn't get on. So I changed my mind again. I ran into someone downtown who gave me a lift back."

He couldn't say: "Netlord thought he'd just murdered me, and he was laying the foundation for me to disappear without being missed." Somehow, it sounded so ridiculous, even with a bullet hole in his shirt. And if he were pressed for details, he would have to say: "He was trying to put some kind of hex on me, or make me a zombie." That would be

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assured of a great reception. And then the police would have to be brought in. Perhaps Haiti was the only country on earth where a policeman might feel obliged to listen seriously to such a story; but the police were still the police. And just at those times when most people automatically turn to the police, Simon Templar's instinct was to avoid them.

What would have to be settled now between him and Theron Netlord, he would settle himself, in his own way.

The waiter, closing windows and emptying ashtrays, was singing to himself under his breath:

"Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Chaché, chaché, lolé-o——"

"What's that?" Simon asked sharply.

"Just Haitian song, sir."

"What does it mean?"

"It mean, *I will go to Sibao*—that holy place in voodoo, sir. *I take oil for lamp,* it say. *If you eat food of Legba you will have to die:*

"Si ou mangé mangé Legba
Ti ga çon onà mouri, oui.
Moin pralé nan Sibao——"

"After spending an evening with Netlord, you should know all about that," Atherton Lee said.

Simon downed his drink and stretched out a yawn.

"You're right. I've had enough of it for one night," he said. "I'd better let you go on closing up—I'm ready to hit the sack myself."

But he lay awake for a long time, stretched out on his bed in the moonlight. Was Theron Netlord merely insane, or was there even the most fantastic possibility that he might be able to make use of things that modern materialistic science did not understand? Would it work on Americans, in America? Simon remembered that one of the books he had read referred to a certain American evangelist as *un houngan insuffisamment instruit;* and it was a known fact that that man controlled property worth millions, and that his followers turned over all their earnings to him, for which he gave them only food, shelter, and sermons. Such things *had* happened, and were as unsatisfactory to explain away as flying saucers. . . .

The ceaseless mutter of the distant drums mocked him till he fell asleep.

"Si ou mangé mangé Legba
Ti ga çon onà mouri, oui!"

He awoke and still heard the song. The moonlight had given way to the gray light of dawn, and the first thing he was conscious of was a fragile unfamiliar stillness left void because the drums were at last silent. But the voice

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went on—a flat, lifeless, distorted voice that was nevertheless recognizable in a way that sent icy filaments crawling over his scalp.

"Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Moin pralé nan Sibao,
Chaché, chaché, lolé-o . . ."

His window overlooked the road that curved up past the inn, and he was there while the song still drifted up to it. The two of them stood directly beneath him—Netlord, and the slender black girl dressed all in white. The girl looked up and saw Simon, as if she had expected to. She raised one hand and solemnly made a pattern in the air, a shape that somehow blended the outlines of a heart and an ornate letter M, quickly and intricately, and her lips moved with it.

It was curiously like a benediction.

Then she turned to the man beside her, as she might have turned to a child.

"Venez," she said.

The tycoon also looked up, before he obediently followed her. But there was no recognition, no expression at all, in the gray face that had once been so ruthless and domineering; and all at once Simon knew why Theron Netlord would be no problem to him or to anyone, any more.

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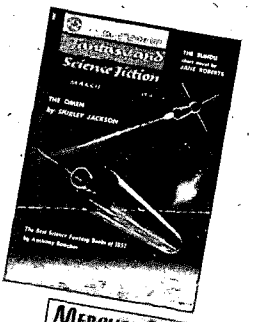

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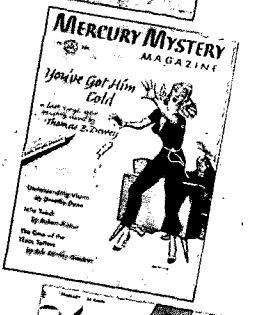

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